
A Holistic Approach to Primary Education

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Introduction

Of the many finer approaches to mould the character and facilitate the absorbent young mind in learning about the environment around it, the following thoughts have been found to be of vital importance in inculcating a robust approach to mentoring and teaching the children attending a typical primary school.

The most glaring contradictions of contemporary lifestyle of the people both in the urban and rural areas has been in how they nurture and educate their children. The child absorbs and furthers the parental values, contradictions and behaviours. Many times this results in defective grownup personalities overburdening an already irrational and deviant society.

The Sages and Saints in our country have, over the ages, sought to correct this by focusing on the young mind and allowing it to grow in paths leading to a mature human being who is a blessing to herself or himself, the family around as well as the society at large. We can see this in action in many the ways that Sri Ramakrishna sought young minds and moulded their character into towering personalities whose positive impact is being felt today.

This article concisely focuses on :

A: Taking a snapshot of the current state of the societal drag on young minds.

B: A concise summary of Vedantic values that Sri Ramakrishna and other sages have lived.

C: Key modern societal values.

D: The Four Stages of development for a child from birth to completing the primary school.

E: A Mixed Mode Educational System Scheme – combining graded classes with non-graded educational mechanisms – team work, nature study and projects, impacting the home, community and society around.

F: Action Plans: What we can immediately do.

G: References

H: Appendix – Three Key Initiatives.

Societal Drag on the Young Minds

What do contemporary children most prefer? What absorbs a hyperactive kid to make is stay put in one place? Why kids? Even adults seem to indulge in it? More so with an almost universal back-patting! Lets not live in denial about the extent of subtle ways in which we have been mightily influenced by the cartoons on the TV and the media. Say the Tom and Jerry show. While everybody gets glued down to the pranks of Tom and Jerry, a little deeper thought shows the kinds of values portrayed – vindictive, violent, 'dont-care-for-collateral-damage' attitudes, etc. We like it and relate with it readily because we play such games in our contemporary society. Add to this the pester power unleashed by kids due to the repetitive advertisements.

What is needed is such education that can be at ease in being a sober witness in these situations as well as in identifying what is going wrong in it. This is where our heritage steps in to say, 'wake up folks, catch the young minds and inculcate in them the values our sages lived for'. Values of patience, of compassion, of service, of devotion, of caring for and serving the community around in the spirit of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. Am I sounding atavistic? No! All these are in tune with contemporary expert recommendations on nurturing emotional intelligence in our children! Since they are in bits and pieces as well as not understood correctly for all the 'detox' political correctness bias that afflicts many, they are just being ignored as academic!

Switch to 'Animal Planet' TV and you see the modern way of inculcating a 'scientific' temper. It is a little better. Just that the man – the superior creature – 'handles' the lesser beings. Can we have a better sense of 'humbleness' in all these? Difficult to grasp this value unless you are steeped into something called being 'spiritual'! And one can be scientific even as one is spiritual! Our sages and Rishis were living exemplars of this.

Look around and you can see the drag that the TV / media culture imposes on the young absorbent minds – an average of 6 hours viewing per day everyday – vulgar soaps, permissive music, violence filled obsessive news, greed filled opulence and ever seductively repetitive brain-washing advertisements – all on 'fair' display for people to lick up and 'achieve' in life through whatever means.... and this is best reflected in the all round societal

corruption of body, mind and soul!

Ask yourselves – are you not so used to this rat race in the society to climb the social ladder... and at the end of it, find yourselves to be no better than a societally trained rat? And the modern schools around the country are trying to make competitive rats starting at an even younger age!

We can change this! We deserve better!

A Summary of Vedantic Values

Vedantic values for the contemporary society? It is no oxymoron! The Late Rev. Swami Ranganathanandaji used to speak of the vigour of folks envisioned in the holy Ishopanishad in understanding, appreciating and celebrating life! While Vedantic values have been associated with a lifestyle that is the foundation for one's inner most yearnings of Sat-Chit-Ananda or

- Developing key Human Intelligence for Holistic Vedantic Growth
- 1: Physical
-- Athletics & Yoga
 - 2: Linguistics
 - 3: Musical
 - 4: Mathematics
including Abstractions
 - 5: Visual Artistry
 - 6: Strategic Execution
 - 7: Social
 - 8: Emotional
 - 9: Spiritual

Truth-Consciousness-Bliss, the fact remains that many living these values have also been celebrated citizens of the world who have significantly contributed to humanity. And it is this that motivates us to focus here – how do we inculcate and

imbibe these foundational values into our young citizens. Interestingly the secular humanitarian values are but a subset of it. Hence we are in no conflict with those misguided shrill voices aggressively pushing 'lofty secularism'.

Vedanta seeks to blossom up every human being to the depths of his or her intrinsic divinity. Be it in the dimensions of the physical, mental, intellectual, emotional or spiritual being – the vedantic values helps nurture and mould an integrated personality and character.

The efforts to imbibe Vedantic Values include:
A: *A deep sense of honestly seeking knowledge and experiencing its results in manifold ways at every level of our understanding in an orchestrated growth towards being a mature human being.*

This notion of human maturity calls for the best physical fitness, sharp mental and cognitive

- Some Values of Truth & Happiness
- Honesty
 - Integrity
 - Sincerety
 - Discernment
 - Objectivity
 - Simplicity
 - Conscience
 - Courage
 - Curiosity

faculties, robust intellectual convictions, balanced understanding of our emotional traits – both positive and negative as well as a deep spiritual abidance that makes for a complete human being. It starts with the naïve curiosity of the child to explore, imitate and learn about the environment around in all its concrete and abstract states!

B: *A deep commitment to proactive living of the wisdom gained from the knowledge seeking – of strengthening the ability to distinguish and decide the true and good from the untrue.*

- Seeking Truth – Values
- Detachment
 - Inquiry & Analysis
 - Introspection
 - Feedback
 - Authentic Faith
 - Persevering Quest
 - Validation
 - Living the Values

This commitment is the basis of such well-thought out endeavours resulting in significant positive impact in the society. More so even during adverse circumstances – with a firmness, discipline and independence that is typical of any sound leadership.

C: *A deep yearning to cultivate and blossom an emotional maturity that goes beyond the call of being conventionally mature.*

- Emotional Maturity
- Cheerfulness
 - Ahimsa:Non-violence
 - Forbearance
 - Active Listening
 - Silence – Inner peace
 - Proactive efforts
 - Contentment
 - Humility
 - Conflict resolutions
 - Altruistic Love
 - Boldness

Ofcourse this yearning is Divinity-centric where the flow of emotions are gradually untangled from and redirected into channels that unfolds the higher dimensions of one's personality. It is here that we find true

forms of love, care, kindness, sympathy manifesting itself.

D: *A deeply satisfying state of being witness to the flow of events around even as one is proactively participating in it.* When one is solidly anchored in this state of inner quiescence do the vedantic values manifest spontaneously and profusely in a very robust way. Each one of us irrespective of race,

religion or gender are unconsciously seeking this state. Though everyone strives, very few reach that perfect state – though some are at various stages of progress. Having tasted it, these 'on-the-way-to-progress' folk's wisdom begs that it is better to consciously educate holistically in a vedantic way rather than in bits and pieces.

Key Modern Societal Values in Education

Secular Education tries to catch and train the young mind to live with the values in tune with the economic / power needs of modern society. Some of these values are spiritually contradictory. Most significant values include Freedom, Dignity, Honesty and Ethics. Typically leaders of the western society are found to be straightforward, hardworking, helpful and in tune with the popular culture – music, dance, fun, eating and socializing. Essentially this is bohemian and self-centric in outlook.

The positive secular values are a full subset of the Vedantic values. 'Whoever said Vedanta means pulling a long sombre face', asked Swami Vivekananda, trying to dispel some false notions. How do we distinguish a contradicting secular value going against a vedantic value? That which, in the long run, takes one down into the instincts as opposed to making one more

Vedantic Right Living
 Congruence & Consistency
 in Thought, Words, Deeds
 Clean & Healthy Living
 Optimistic & Ethical
 Duty
 - Discipline & Sacrifice
 - Initiative
 - Perseverance
 - Leadership
 Inter-relationships
 - Courteous & Respectful
 - Helpful
 - Grateful
 - Trustworthy
 - Affectionate
 - Caring & Sharing
 - Fair

holistic and spiritual is definitely a regressive value. This includes notions of political correctness where one can spiritually feel the superficiality of it in the gut. Examples include charity by the patently bohemian Beauty show's queens working

for a day with missionary orphanages! This provokes throughbred atheists to correctly make vedantic assessments like such orphanages and charity reinforcing the hypocrisy of a capitalist society -- in first indulging, then causing these societal problems and finally appreciating the volunteers who pick up the muck – more so when they do it in the limelight – all guilt covered up! Perhaps for the limelight!

The most important aspect of understanding and living these values is the ability to distinguish the thin gray zone that separates what is right versus what is not – 'walking on the razor's edge'! Those truly living vedantic values know it and do it. It is very challenging and many are known to tumble from time to time! Others cry hoarse – as contradictions catch up with them! No doubt, though, all of the right modern societal values are a subset of the vedantic values, few get it right in progressing on the spiritual front. Invariably there is this funny paradoxical view that many 'secular' folks are more 'spiritual' than the so called 'religious' ones – the mild, non-descript 'do good to all' types. The key distinguishing parameter that separates the spiritual from the secular is the degree of self-effacement that a spiritual one practices while the ego needs for the limelight, however sophisticated, stands out in good for the secular! That is vedantic value in practice!

The Four Stages of Children Education

The education of a child starts when it is in the womb of the mother. There is no better modern and scientific illustration of this than that of Prahlada the wonder boy of Srimad Bhagavatam fame. Like in the Gurukul education system, what we see is the explosive growth of the learnings in the blossoming young mind.

The big question: How can we facilitate this blossoming in the most effective and efficient ways? How can we remove all disruptive repetitive, habituated inter-family and inter-

The Four Stages of Learning in a Child
 Stage A: 0 - 3 Years:
 The Infant Learner.
 Stage B: 4 - 6 Years:
 The Absorbent Learner.
 Stage C: 7 - 10 Years:
 The Independent Learner.
 Stage D: 11 - 14 Years:
 The 'Coming to Grips' Learner.

human transactions that drain the child of the concentration and focus needed to blossom – especially all such cultural baggage that goes against the harmonious working of vedantic values in the mind of a young child?

The Reassuring Answer: Over the ages, we have done it. Again and again successfully! Living *vasudhaiva kutumbham* ideals in the family as well as the vedantic gurukuls!

One can observe four stages of a child's progress into adolescence. Each stage has its

own key characteristics – which in a typical vedantic way we seek to mould through our true cultural living.

Stage A: The Infant Learner: Transactions at home impact significantly - which is why there has to be total integrity in the high values being lived in the interactions amongst those in the immediate vicinity of the child. Many of the life long transactions or personality idiosyncrasies can be traced to what was learnt in those first few months and years of an infant's unconscious learnings! Yes, behaviour is moulded by the environment around! More so of harmony, love, affection, caring, security and warmth that is critical to every sound family foundation.

A Vedantic thrust in education starts at the level of helping families fine tune their core family values. More so in helping them stabilize in their core spiritual and family habits. And when the members start a new family, they have the needed value scaffolding ready to bank on.

Stage B: The Absorbent Learner: The greatest miracle of life is the speed with which a 4 year old child learns languages, concepts, cultural nuances as well as in staking its claim to be one amongst the adults around. The child seeks to know as well as seeks to be treated as an adult. Ofcourse in that process, he or she learns the notions of various degrees of rejection that adults might impose on him or her and why that happens. This feedback helps it learn the ropes of making acceptable decisions.

The Vedantic orientation of education seeks to mould and anchor that budding sense of self-esteem in the right perspective of what is true of itself as the Atman and what he or she is not in terms of feelings.

Stage C: The Independent Learner: Rebuffed during decision making times, the child learns of the values that guide the decision making. Sometimes silently. Many times quite gregariously. A child buffets the parents or elders with many questions seeking authentic answers. It is also time for unconscious reality checks on what people talk about on value stories and mythological messages versus how the adults and others around conduct themselves in reality. Have you not seen that a pair of inquiring quiet young eyes witnessing most family interactions – good and bad – while independently learning what works and what does not? Unconsciously. Unknown to all!

Vedanta education's glory time is in its beautiful

conception of a gurukul where the Gurus and their families live the vedantic values in their everyday life! More so, with all these children watching and interacting with the adults very closely in almost all aspects of their living. When the child steps out of the home and into the Gurukul he or she takes the first steps into being an 'Independent Learner' away from the family of birth.

Stage D: The 'Coming to Grips' Learner: Having seen, heard, imitated and now being challenged to be authentic, the child grows up into the teens where effects of his or her decisions matter. Unconsciously, for all the transactions that the child engages in, the feedback goes back into building up his or her sense of self esteem and how he or she will relate to the core values, daily habits as well as the social environment around.

The Gurukul traditions stand out in grooming every young child reaching adolescence into a responsible, self reliant and well balanced personality. More so when the gurus and their families in the gurukul live in close quarters with these children. What more can be exemplary and practical? No doubt our philosophic traditions have come to portray the best of the entire mankind's philosophical achievements.

Are we talking something idealistic here in this day of post-modern realities? Look around carefully and you will find several successfully run residential schools embodying many of the gurukul ideals. Detailed thoughts and action plans on how these vedantic values get translated into practical day-to-day learning experiences constitute the distinct style of vedantic education of the interest group running the institution. 'Yatho math, thatho path!' - we can see so many variations of in the practice of vedanta as well as the approaches to post-modern vedantic education.

A Mixed Mode Educational Schema

A bigger challenge exists for all educationists seeking to put into practice the best of the gurukul traditions in primary schools that offer day education and accredited to run along governmental educational norms.

Typical primary schools manage education by recruiting teachers with an degree or diploma in primary education at a salary that not many are attracted to the teaching profession itself. If it is a rural school, then the situation is much

more difficult – a great recruit might just be a simple graduate perhaps.

The teachers are expected to toe the principal's diktats and the students, the teacher's diktats. The guru-shishya tradition is reduced to a ignoble caricature of sychopancy. The value system that the students imbibe only nourishes the vicious cycle of societal degeneration. The parents do not tend to be sensitive to the subtler issues of what good education is all about. Let us not be enamoured by the so called societal progress on the economic or technological or social fronts – a society that lacks in living core values is just speeding up its implosion on the evolutionary scale. Just look at what the scientists world over have been warning about environmental pollution and global warming given our fragile eco-system. Yes, all these are inter-related!

Of the many approaches that have been made to reconcile the glaring contradictory demands of the contemporary educational value system with that of our vedantic values, here is one approach that many have put into practice with varying degree of success. It takes true leadership practicing vedanta to be able to make this effort successful.

The approach focuses on the core management team and how they live the vedantic values that they seek to espouse. Where there is depth and authenticity, every decision made or problem successfully overcome by this team reflects the living of the vedantic values! We speak of a team and not just a founder since founder oriented organizations tend to degenerate faster. Cultist cultures undercut our vedantic values.

Around this core team that articulates and lives its variant of vedantic values, a group of committed and qualified teachers need to be built up. The teachers work closely on all matters that affect the institution – educational philosophy, student intake, parent interactions, infrastructure, processes and procedures as well as mechanisms to comply with various requirements. Yes, these folks will accept some of all that is modern and reject all its varied contradictions. Mostly silent and yet deeply powerful, such teachers have in them a robust sense of trusteeship, pro-active participation as well as a commitment to go the extra mile in building and sustaining the right environment. Get such teachers and their families to live together in the proximity of the students - living where a lot of contemporary fluff like 'lifestyles' or 'trends' or 'attitudes' are rejected consciously

– a living where the students both girls and boys see why these fashionable societal mores are best replaced by the more enthusiastically pursued, beneficial, time-tested traditions of successful vedantic families.

Key to these interactions is in getting the students in a variety of their interest groups to live every aspect of life with the teachers – this means making choices, taking decisions and getting the feedback – not just advice! Performance – benchmarked against concrete parameters – counts! And transformative mentoring form the basis.

Where this 24x7 living as a big extended family is not possible, the next best option for day schools would be have the teachers live within the school premises itself. Going beyond the call of accreditation requirements, the curriculum is expanded almost double to include non-graded multi-class interest groups based indoor and outdoor, guided, learning activities, experiences and initiatives. It is these that are the unique to the institutions and constitute the core DNA of the institution.

How do we handle non-graded learning exercises, both indoors and outdoors, with those in a graded, same age, class oriented educational setup? These are the key aspects:

A: Augmenting the existing syllabi with vedanta value orientation in content as well as delivery.

B: Designing a value oriented set of goals for every quarter for interest groups comprising a teacher and compatible students within same stage but different classes.

B1: The group size is small – essentially reflecting a better student – teacher ratio.

B2: Students of different classes but same predisposition choose matching mentors to form an interest group.

B3: The interest groups span the spectrum of meaningful activities that one can organize.

B4: While there is a variety of everyday living activities to be taken care of, not all will be done by every group – there are the core activities for all and the interest activities relevant to the choices made. A good example for stage D students would be the group projects funding and money management as a core activity along with special interests activity like gardening or shopping or medicare or organizing festivities.

B5: Most of the group activities are centered around the individual, the family and gurukul living, the environment as well as that which constitutes true sustainable societal progress. These include team work, excursions, creatives, experiments and developmental projects.

C: Getting the parents and community support.

C1: Parents periodically (fortnightly or monthly) interact and obtain exposure to the value culture that the students are emulating and living.

C2: Parents and students go through specific programmes that iron out and help live with the differences in their life values and life habits.

C3: Community support for the core values is best exemplified by their proactive contributions in rewarding, sustaining and nurturing the institutional activities.

D: Vedanta values oriented Child Psychologists and Child Development Specialists have a significant role to play in the choices, design, development and implementation of the group activities. Each child is a unique personality with his or her own pace of growth, abilities, interests and patterns of behaviour. It becomes vital for such experts to study the children and integrate them into the right groups for the best fit as well as help in design the activities too.

E: Appropriately oriented Self Help Groups can reach out to Stage A children in various homes while Vedantic *anganwadis* can make a big difference in the life of Stage B children.

Thus Children can be enabled to learn, work, play and undergo various activities either individually or collaboratively or cooperatively – for their true holistic growth.

What can We do?

Having understood the broad thrust of this document, there are several concrete initiatives that an interested group can undertake:

* Brainstorm the details out. Formulate the roadmap and action plan. Execute, incorporate the feedback and improve on the learnings.

* Mentor the management team, teachers and staff with people who are truly living Vedanta.

* Mentor the various groups of people involved in generating various kinds of teaching material – the technical, creative and content people -- in the vedanta value system so that they can choose and express various concepts in flavours that reflect the subtle vedanta values rather than be in conflict with it.

* Undertake a variety of Educational Material Development Projects. Educational materials include books, documentaries, musicals, film,, animations, dramas, street plays – a variety of media content as well as delivery technologies.

* Use Information Technologies extensively. Do Software Projects – develop animation packages that can convey the messages for the young independent learners and evaluate them.

*On a broader note, enumerate out critical every

day and long term challenging events as well as the vedantic way of responding to it. This includes creative ways of telling our heritage stories, music of various kinds as well as a variety of children activities – games, projects, social events, festivities etc. Create case studies that point out how the different Vedantic leadership styles make the difference.

* Developing Conceptual Strand Maps for Vedantic Values and in understanding various aspects of contemporary educational areas and challenges – science, technology, social studies, languages, environment, mathematics, heritage, self-development, etc. These can be used by various teacher groups to design their teaching content as well as delivery mechanisms.

The above are just a small sample of what one can do! A motivated group can do even more!

Conclusions

In summary, the sages who have run Gurukuls focused on developing and nurturing the young minds to achieve the best in growing up as a complete human being -- What Swami Vivekananda defines as 'Man Making Character Building' Education! A holistic approach to Primary school education integrates the best of modern science & technology as well as the latest educational advances with the best of our Vedantic values and heritage. Vedanta oriented schools in the rural settings have shown extraordinary results and the maximum promise. Graduates of such schools and programmes have silently and significantly contributed to humanity and the world at large.

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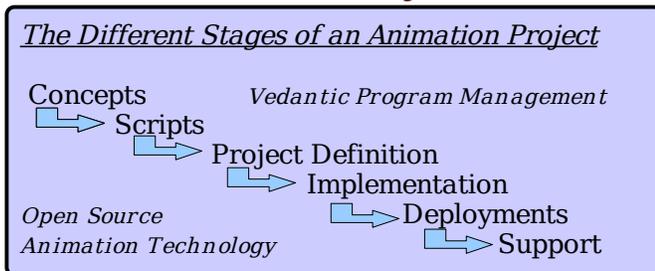
Appendix - Three Initiatives

Presented here are concise overview of three concrete educational projects in Vedantic value orientation that can yield significant results.

A: Two Stage Vedanta-Education Workshops

- * Focuses on core vedanta values and how one imbibes, lives and blossoms out in these. It is a Vedanta Self Improvement Programme.
- * Values reinforcing case studies of tough situations, pitfalls and responses are dealt with. "Walking on the Razor's edge and making the right choices everytime, alltimes!"
- * Workshops are either basic or advanced.
- * Tailored separately for the school staff and Management, the Teachers, the Self Help Groups, the educational material producers, the creatives and the technical teams.
- * The Two stage workshop format introduces two days (saturday & sunday) of key concepts through practical examples, makes participants experiment and experience, assigns a loaded homework spread over several days. This is followed by a two day (following saturday & sunday) appraisal, feedback and evaluation sessions wherein key problems faced and approaches used are effectively discussed.
- * A weekly hour long followup session helps sustain the new lessons / practices learnt.

B: Animation Software Projects



- The six stages of a typical animation project are:
- * Concepts: A bunch of relevant messages are assembled together after duely checking out its acceptability, coherence and congruence with vedantic values, relevance as well as potential impact on the target audience.
 - * Scripts: The messages are then storyboarded to generate the concrete scripts from start to finish matching other constraints like time duration, technological limitations, costs etc.
 - * Project Definition: After the concepts and scripts are reviewed and cleared, the project goals are formulated, resources identified and allocated, risks understood and mitigated.
 - * Implementation: Creatives, Engineers and IT folks use the best of the open source technology available to come up packages that can be

distributed with minimal but effective copyright (GPL - 'Gnu Public License') requirements.

- * Deployments: The effectiveness of the concepts, scripts, design and implementation is known only when the target audiences give their feedback. Different usage scenarios result in substantial revision of the concept and scripts – this feedback is critically vital for the success of the package and the team efforts.
- * Support: Many project efforts go waste due to the lack of followup support both in terms of usage as well as technical problems that arise. A good support infrastructure ensures long life!

An effective vedantic value oriented program management ensures that the right values are conveyed and subtle deviations do not occur.

Topics for animation can include Nachiketa's quest for immortality, Sushrutha's approach in cultivating medicinal plants, how deforestation is leading to a grave future, how spiritually bankruptcy leads to public corruption etc etc.

C: Educational Materials and Teaching Aids

Using the above program management approach a variety of educational material including teacher guides, detailed lesson plans, story books, comics, musical materials, street-play and drama scripts can be formulated.

Model Lesson Plans for typical state curriculum is in great demand. The focus is on content delivery mechanisms with an augmented syllabi contents while retaining the state prescriptions intact. An extreme example is: Remember it is not so much as to what answers children ought to give for contorted historical events (Ex: 2005 NCERT textbooks talk of Sri Ramakrishna as 'an illiterate and mentally unbalanced' person) as much as the way the teachers orient the children to critically look not just at what is being communicated in such textbooks but the true nature of the 'detoxifying' context too.

Amoral subjects like science and mathematics are handled in a special way by highlighting the active spiritual and humanistic state of the learner too. After all, like most scientists fear, the wrong technology in the hands of wrong people shows up as the terrorists and their arsenals. Or on an evolutionary scale, the insensitive world citizenry not doing enough on Global Warming or the encroaching pollution or the spread of TB or Diabetes – silent killers as potent as AIDS. Yes, moral labeling is wrong while compassionate moral assessment is right!