

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In 2011 “Conversations Today” featured a rapidly growing organization, cofounded by 12 like-minded individuals using the idea of “Power of One” to build life-skills among underserved children and youth in and around Bengaluru. Today it has grown into a massive innovation and life skills-building organization that has already reached over a million children in Delhi, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Telangana and Uttarakhand. Since its inception in 1999, Dream a Dream has provided unique opportunities for children to tap into their fullest potential in all aspects of their lives. Through their After School Life Skill Programme and Career Connect Programme they develop life skills such as problem solving, managing conflict, communication, self-reliance, enterprise and leadership among others, thereby nudging children to dream big, learn to thrive and grow into confident, well rounded individuals. Over 9000 teachers and educators have been trained in innovative learning methodologies that will help them address every child’s unique and diverse learning needs.

What are Innovation Labs? These are physical indoor/outdoor spaces in Bengaluru where children have the opportunity to engage in sports and arts. The Life Skills Programme documents the journey of each student and demonstrates the changes that the student undergoes, in order to build larger programmes that can achieve the desired impact at scale. The Career Development Programme provides youth with spoken English classes, career awareness sessions, money management and other workshops. Information about internships, scholarships, vocational training and jobs are also disseminated to keep each young person engaged and prepared to make a healthy transition into adulthood.

Besides these, Dream a Dream also routinely engages other social organizations, government agencies, educators and parents through its ‘system demonstrations’ and as a way to influence entire ecosystems to be more conducive for a child’s wellbeing. The organization develops policies and frameworks through rigorous research of children’s ecosystems at both micro and macro levels.

Says Vishal Talreja, Co-founder of Dream a Dream, “At Dream a Dream, we keep the child at the core of all our work. Dignity, Equity and Inclusion are the three pillars that help us achieve a thriving future for these children. We recognize the need to engage with the social identities of our young people.” Suchetha Bhat, CEO, Dream a Dream, explains how the lens of cultural intersectionality is applied to build their

activities. She lists out four cultural needs that are recognized and built into Dream a Dream’s programmes: a. The need to address adversity; b. The need to address stigma, stereotyping, prejudice, and violence; c. The need to facilitate voice and participation and; d. The need to accommodate difference and change structures of discrimination.

Over the years, Dream a Dream has evolved from direct implementation of programmes to creating systemic change. Says Vishal, “Our direct programmes for children and teachers in Bengaluru act as innovation labs for curricula design and teacher-training modules. This helps us incorporate insight into large-scale programmes delivered via governments and partners. After the launch and implementation of the ‘Happiness Curriculum’, now we are in various stages of developing life-skills based interventions in five states and are also in the process of partnering with two more states. We are now at a potential to train 200,000 teachers and impact 4 million youth. Today, we are recognised as thought leaders in the life skills space with expertise in addressing adversity and taking on the ecosystem builder role.”

The efficacy of Dream a Dream’s programmes is visible in the clear and succinct way that their alumni speak on their online platforms. Dream a Dream won the “Football for Good” award by Common Goal, at the World Football Summit 2020. The organization is a certified “Great Place to Work” in 2021. For the third time in a row, this year Dream a Dream is featured in the HUNDRED’s annual Global Collection as one of the leading innovations in K12 education. The organization has earned many other accolades during its years of rising as a force of good.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to newer challenges. Suchetha points out that for the young people that the organization serves, stark and growing inequalities have emerged. Some of the glaring problems are: loss of income and livelihood, migration, high levels of anxiety, children forced to become adults, confusion and misinformation, heightened violence and abuse, gendered impact, loss of learning, loss of dignity, confidence and self-esteem, impact of trauma- all of these factors leading to an inability to thrive.

The organization put together a COVID-19 task force which since April of last year has provided ration support, reintegration modules to encourage kids to get back into learning and has set up a youth-run online mentoring programme. The Life Skills Programme and Skill Development Programme have been made available online. A new movement “#WhatIf” was floated, where young changemakers can



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reimagine themselves to become resourceful changemakers within their settings and continue to make useful contributions to their immediate surroundings. Vishal explains that the Dream a Dream community has now identified a whole host of areas where support needs to be built, ranging from medical care to information, to social and emotional support systems. Aside from the pandemic related changes, Suchetha adds that continuous effort is being made towards strengthening monitoring and evaluation of Dream a Dream’s projects.

“We realise that this is not enough, and that we can do more. Pervasive systemic barriers-- like an education system anchored on outdated and narrow notions of what success means-- does not allow life skills to take centre-stage in education and prevents children

from thriving, says Vishal, adding that, “We want to evolve further, from equipping children with life skills, to promoting ‘thriving’ as the purpose of education. Sharing what this means for Dream a Dream, Suchetha says that, “Thriving includes life skills and stretches beyond that, enabling children to be resilient, responsible and happy. A move towards thriving allows us to tackle systemic barriers currently holding children back and create a more enabling environment. This is a long journey that will require large-scale change, but one that we are well-positioned to embark on given our track record and one that allows us to take advantage of the movement towards holistic education, well-being and equity within India and around the world.”

Archanaa Ramesh