

As the airport taxi pulled off the highway and began navigating a congested grid of local streets, it became clear that I was nearing my destination. I had travelled half way across the world to Pondicherry, India, with one guiding question: what can a school do to provide a real education?

As I sat in that taxi, I considered my question. It hinges on how I choose to define education. The dictionary offers two options: 1) the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university, or 2) an enlightening experience. Most academic institutions, including all those I have ever attended, stick strictly to the first definition. Yet to me, this described schooling, not education. The things that have molded my identity and values, that have challenged me to introspect and grow, have not been a part of my systematic instruction. *Those* are the things that I classify as my education. The second definition seemed true enough, but failed to capture the core essence of education that I was getting at.

Reading Aurobindo Ghosh's writings on education had added another definition to the melee: "The acquiring of various kinds of information is only one and not the chief of the means and necessities of education: its central aim is the building of the powers of the human mind and spirit." I was intrigued, and excited, that this option included reference to not just the mind, but also the part of a person that encompasses their character and emotions – the spirit. This holistic approach to education forms the foundation for Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education (SAICE), located in none other than Pondicherry, India.

A Love of Learning

Stepping onto the SAICE grounds for the first time, I was greeted with an idyllic scene of students reading independently in the sunny courtyard, and classes of four or five convening in open-air alcoves. It was a contrast to the image of schooling I had grown accustomed to: 30+ students neatly arranged in an artificially lit room. However, over the next months of observing classes and interviewing stakeholders, I learned that these surface dissimilarities were only the beginning.

The proverb goes, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." The SAICE model asks, why stop at simply teaching the skill, when you could also inspire a passion for it? With passion, the work becomes enjoyable. Furthermore, even given the option of stopping – the man wouldn't. SAICE's primary goal is not the transfer of knowledge or skills, but rather the development of an attitude: a love of learning. The approach is to instill this growth mindset so that students want to learn, encourage introspection so that they can identify what they need to learn, and then develop independence so that they can learn on their own.

Instilling this mindset is an elusive goal. Nonetheless, SAICE achieves it. This was clear in the alumni I interviewed, as they each cited continuous progressing as a top priority in life. These results come from SAICE's conscious and concentrated efforts. The educational system itself is designed accordingly, equally prioritizing all subject areas and eliminating external pressure to learn. By giving the same importance to areas like art and sports as it does to academics, the emphasis is on the process of learning rather than on specific subject matter. Students can find what they're inherently passionate about through the 'Free Progress' model, where they build their own curriculum without restrictions or requirements. Furthermore, the system excludes exams, grades, and degrees. This creates a stress-free environment, where learning is enjoyable and effort is more important than outcomes. Rather than enforcing extrinsic pressures, the model strengthens intrinsic motivation.

The system is complemented by the teachers' perspectives and pedagogies, in which students' curiosity is given paramount importance. The prevalent belief is that if you approach a subject in the right way, you can show students that anything can be interesting. By answering students' questions clearly and intelligently, teachers can stoke curiosity and encourage still more questions. The trail of inquiries leads to an engaging discussion, through which students can learn much more, much more easily than through traditional methods.

Introspection is similarly baked into the SAICE model. Students have informal conversations with teachers throughout the semester to discuss their interests and passions. However, before structuring their Free Progress program for the year, students have more formal, long discussions with teachers and administrators to examine what they wish to work on, and whether they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. According to alumni, this practice builds students into conscious individuals, with awareness of what they wish to do and what they value.

The final component emphasized at SAICE is independence, and confidence that you have the ability to learn *anything* on your own. One alumnus recounted being faced with a difficult class and lousy professor during graduate school - her first semester of conventional education. As apprehensive as she was, she had the confidence that SAICE had given her the requisite skills to figure it out on her own. More importantly, she knew SAICE gave her the independence, perseverance, and will to push through to get to where she wants to be. This anecdote reflects the school's goal of equipping students with the tools of each subject, so that they can do the work themselves. At younger ages, teachers never refuse to explain the how and the why of things. If not through direct instruction, they direct the student to others qualified to answer or introduce them to relevant reading materials. This shows them what it really means to study and creates a habit of making a persistent effort to find answers. At higher levels, students get only a small amount of direction from their teachers, so that they practice persevering and finding solutions on their own, instead of giving up and asking for help.

A Committed Community

To be admitted to SAICE as a student, there's one criterion: parents who agree with the school's unconventional approach. To be accepted as a teacher or administrator at SAICE, there's a higher obstacle: a willingness to work for housing, food and maintenance – but no actual salary. The success of SAICE's educational model relies on the complete commitment from all stakeholders: parents, students, administrators and teachers alike. Thus, just like the students learn only for the love of learning, teachers too teach only for the love of teaching. From interviews, I learned that their intrinsic motivation came from two sources: first, the desire to progress themselves, and second, a genuine love for their students. Teachers were deeply committed to the goal of inspiring students to continuously improve, since they themselves shared that mindset. They held the perspective that they learned as much, if not more, from the students as the students learned from them. As a result, they hold a deep respect for their students.

But more than that, teachers unconditionally love their students. When I asked teachers for advice for aspiring educators, they echoed a similar sentiment: "For me the most magical formula has been love. Love my children and they respond, they understand the language of love." This love is why and how teachers maintain a careful commitment to the educational model and teaching styles required to accomplish the school's mission. Furthermore, the feeling of the whole community as a family is what makes SAICE what it is. Alumni described

administrators and teachers as their surrogate parents and closest friends, growing together and remaining in contact for years.

In my interviews, SAICE was described as any child's dream come true, and honestly, in my own observations I could see that being the case. The question that remains is, can this be replicated elsewhere? Admittedly, abolishing grades and not paying teachers may not be plausible in other contexts. However, I believe the core ideas of emphasizing learning and recruiting committed teachers can be translated. Slowly, by realigning what we value in education, even mainstream schooling can become what SAICE is right now. Something really special.