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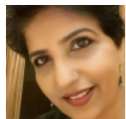
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## Don't want to stagnate? Open doors!

Written by [Asha Alexander](#) 20 April 2018 [Projects](#)



Asha Alexander is the principal at The Kindergarten Starters, Dubai, a GEMS Primary School, catering to 5500 students. She received her Master of Science in Educational Leadership from The Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2011 and she also holds a Master's degree in Education and English from the Bangalore University in India.

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Images courtesy of author.

*"At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of parents."* - Jane D. Hull

**The Open Doors programme** is a cultural change we affected here at The Kindergarten Starters, with an aim to embrace the wider community and allow learning to flow in and out of our classrooms.

To begin with, it was our attempt to bring our parents closer to us, to give them a real understanding of how students learn in the classroom and beyond. Thousands of parents have had an opportunity to visit the school, observe a lesson and feed back to us regarding their experience. We feel that once you are immersed in an experience, you come out enriched with new learning. As we began a closer interaction with our parents, their feedback left us with new thoughts and ideas, and new ways of looking at our learning.

The concept of open doors at KGS emerged from the question: *"How can engaging students and parents with real-world situations, through interdisciplinary projects, help students find innovative solutions to solve problems?"*

The school's interest in this question stemmed from our observation that parents were apprehensive of the approach we initiated in 2013. They weren't very sure of how the curriculum - no textbooks, new curriculum developments with STREAM (interdisciplinary learning of Science, Technology, Religion, Engineering, Art and Maths) and the Reggio Emilia approach - was being implemented by teachers at KGS. The first year was a challenging one, where we had to convince the parents that this was the way forward, and that it would definitely have an impact on student learning.

Innovation was always at the forefront at The Kindergarten Starters, and in May 2016 we decided to open the doors for all of our parents. This Open Doors initiative allowed them to get into the classes and watch how their children learned at school. Our aim was to get opinions and fair feedback from parents on an ongoing basis. We wanted to take the parents' view on teaching and learning into consideration, actioning their suggestions - if practical - with high-priority.

There was a theory behind this initiative where, through strategic planning, and in partnership with school stakeholders, school leaders developed a school vision to promote an 'open door' culture of innovation at KGS. Before we initiated Open Doors, the school leaders pondered upon the hypothetical impact this innovation would lead to.

**"Thousands of parents have visited the school and given feedback."**

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school leaders pondered upon the hypothetical impact and innovation would lead to:

### What were the hypothetical “if’s and then’s”?

“If we open doors to parents, then... parents’ understanding of how students learn will deepen, and if *that* happens... there will be more parental and community engagement, leading to a strong bonding with the teachers, and if *that* happens... student outcome improves, and if *that* happens... then the quality of instruction improves, and if *that* happens... students become responsible for their actions and develop a positive attitude!”

### The journey begins with no looking back

To support the innovations at KGS, the school actively participated in [Creating Communities of Innovation](#), a two-year research project with Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. This focused on research-based, grassroots innovation for school improvement. It partnered with the Learning Innovations Laboratory at Harvard for a one-year exploration on creating an adaptive culture. With their support, a KGS innovation team was formed. This group developed and implemented an innovation plan to drive school improvement and innovation skills across stakeholder groups - including students, teachers, school leaders, parents, and other schools in the region.

### And the doors opened.....

In just seven months we had 50% of the parents visit the classes! We recorded the number of parents observing lessons every day, and recording the observations that they made:

	SEPT '16	OCT '16	NOV '16	DEC '16	JAN '17	FEB '17	MAR '17	TOTAL
TOTAL FOR KG	542	483	183	38	36	31	0	
TOTAL FOR GRADES	454	537	256	23	47	19	0	
OVERALL TOTAL	996	1020	439	61	83	50	0	<b>2649</b>

### Applying the indicators of impact

Parental concerns and suggestions were immediately actioned. These were small changes that occurred at the respective grade levels.

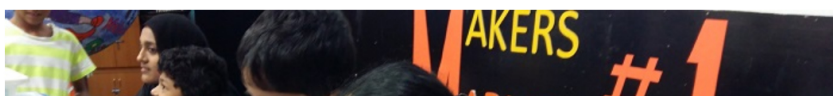
Following this, our students and teachers flowed out of the classrooms, taking their learning to the wider community through the expeditionary approach to learning. Students visited their immediate surroundings, places of interest in the UAE, and outside the country to grow in their understanding of the world. This learning then returned to the classroom, where students cascaded their learning experiences to others, thereby growing in confidence and honing communication skills as they were questioned by their peers.

**“There are clear benefits when parents are actively engaged in learning.”**

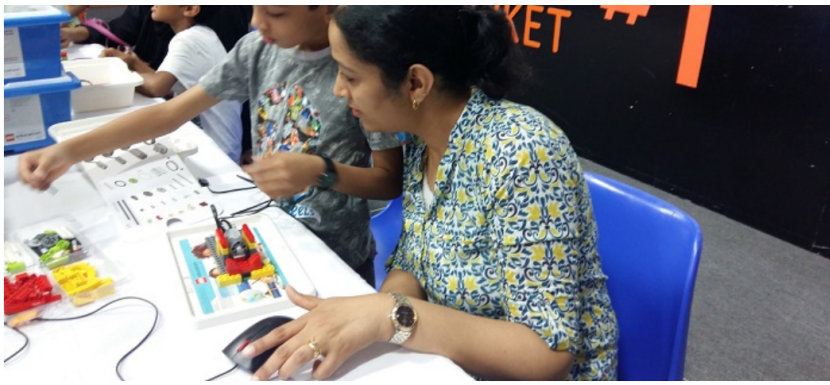
One idea that travelled from Pittsburgh to Dubai found expression in the form of the [Maker Faire](#). The synergy between parents and children as they worked to create artefacts at the [Children’s Museum in Pittsburgh](#) was the inspiration that led us to invite over three hundred parents to share this experience with their children via our own Maker Market. The unique addition to this concept was to have students auction their products to raise funds for the building of a school in Malawi.



The experience enabled parents to partake in the act of building something together. It strengthened bonds between parent and child, as well as giving students a platform to work on their entrepreneurial skills, marketing their product to raise funds for providing underprivileged Malawi children with quality education. Parents play a *critical* role in their child’s learning.







Showing children that education is important, building their confidence and connecting with their school, helps to shape their learning and wellbeing. Studies demonstrate that there are clear, measurable benefits for children when their parents are actively engaged in their learning. We find that our students have developed self-esteem, are motivated to learn, and are positive about school and achieving good grades. Young children are more likely to maintain high aspirations, plan to go on to further education and build a career when innovation, enterprise and creative thinking are actively supported by parents.

It is a culture that invites others into our learning environment, where we share best practice that emanates with schools throughout the UAE and beyond. New approaches to education - like Reggio Emilia - have begun influencing how kindergarteners learn at our school. This is being shared within other **GEMS Schools**, creating a ripple of new learning throughout our network.

Our Open Doors initiative has seen a wonderful flow of students between our school and our local peers. This has led to greater collaboration among schools in the area. We encourage you to open your doors. All that is open continues to flow and grow, while closed pools tend to stagnate.

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