

**Journal of the
Krishnamurti Schools**

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JOURNAL OF THE KRISHNAMURTI SCHOOLS

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An Educational Journal

This is a journal on education brought out annually. It is an anthology of writings by educators, teachers, and thinkers exploring a vision of education in its many dimensions—philosophy, psychology, classroom experiences, curriculum, social concerns, nature and environment, as well as other contemporary issues. It lays special emphasis on J Krishnamurti's transformative educational philosophy. It will be of interest to teachers, parents, educational administrators, teacher-educators, as well as anyone interested in education

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Dear Reader

Kindly share this *Journal*, after your perusal,
with a school nearby or a school you know, or
a teacher who you feel will enjoy this, so that
it reaches more educators.

Many thanks

The Editors

THE ART OF LISTENING

So, if you will this morning apply the art, the art of listening. We rarely listen to anybody. We are so full of our own conclusions, our own experiences, our own problems, our own judgements, so we have no space in which to listen. We ought to have some space so that as two friends, you and I, the speaker, are talking over together their problems, amicably, under the shade of a tree, sitting down and looking at the mountains, but concerned with their problems, and so they are willing to listen to each other. And to listen is only possible when you put aside your particular opinion, your particular knowledge or problem, your conclusions; when you're free to listen, not interpreting, not judging, not evaluating, but actually the art of listening. To listen with great care, attention, with affection. And if we have such an art, if we have learnt such... rather, if you are capable of such listening, then communication becomes very, very simple. There'll be no misunderstanding.

Communication implies to think together, to share the things that we are talking about together, to partake in the problem as two human beings living in a monstrous corrupt world, where everything is so ugly, brutal, violent and meaningless, it is very important, it seems to me, if I may point out, that in the art of listening one learns immediately, one sees the fact instantly. And... if one listens rightly, as we pointed out the meaning of that word 'right' - correctly, accurately, not what you think is right or wrong, but in the art of listening there is freedom, and in that freedom every word, every nuance of word has significance, and there is immediate comprehension, which is immediate insight, and therefore immediate freedom to observe.

J. Krishnamurti, Public Talk 4 Ojai, California, USA -
10th April 1977

WHAT IS COMPASSION?

What is compassion? Is it emotion, something romantic? Does it expend itself in some kind of social work? One has to find out what compassion is, what love is. Is love desire? Is love pleasure? And can there be love where there is ambition? Can there be love when one is trying to become something—not only in the outward world but also psychologically where there is this constant struggle to be or to become something? Can there be love when there is jealousy and violence; when there is division between you and me? Can there be love when you are nationalistic? In this nationalistic division and the division of beliefs, images, can there be love? Of course, there can be no love when there is such division. But all of us are so heavily conditioned, and we accept that conditioning as normal.

What is the relationship of love to sorrow? Can suffering and love go together—not only personal suffering but the enormous suffering of mankind, the suffering that wars have brought about and are still bringing about, the suffering of people living in totalitarian states? Can there be love when there is suffering? Or is it only with the ending of suffering that there is passionate compassion?

After stating all this, where are we? Is love just an ideal—something which we do not know and therefore want to have: that extraordinary sense of great compassion? But we will not pay the price for it. We would like to have this marvellous jewel but are unwilling to make a gesture, do something that will bring it about.

If you want peace, you must live peacefully, not be divided into nations with wars and all the hideousness that is going on. So, what price do we pay for this, not coins and paper, but inwardly? How deeply, profoundly, do I see that nationalism, that all division, must end in myself as a human being? Because one human being—whether you or I—is like the rest of the world, psychologically. We all suffer, we all go through agonies, we all go through great fears, uncertainties, confusion, we are all caught in absurd religious nonsense. We are that. Can we see the totality, not as an idea, not as something longed for, but as a

fact, as a burning, actual, daily fact? Then out of that perception the responsibility of compassion comes.

Compassion goes with great intelligence. That intelligence is not the operation of knowledge. Knowledge can solve many problems, intellectual and technical, but intelligence is something entirely different. Please do not accept what I am saying, just look at it. You may have read a great deal, be capable of great arguments and of solving problems, but the problem-solving mind is not the intelligent mind. Intelligence comes with compassion, with love. And when that intelligence is an action of compassion, it is global, not a particular action.

J. Krishnamurti, Brockwood Park,
2nd Question Answer Meeting
– 4th September 1980

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Editorial



Early in his journey as a transformative educator, Krishnamurti had suggested:

‘And if you are interested in teaching, and also in what I am saying, then you will find out the method of teaching... You want me to lay down the principles; I cannot do it. But you will find out for yourself how to work, how to draw the principles out of what I have been saying, if you are interested as teachers. For teachers, it is not a peculiar profession. I do not think it is a specialist profession: it is a human profession; you need not be scientists who are specially drawn. You are human beings, and from that you are to approach it — your teaching and everything else.’

—J. Krishnamurti - Varanasi, 1933

The twenty-ninth issue of the *Journal of Krishnamurti Schools*, as with the previous twenty-eight issues, continues to explore, grapple with and seek clarity around this very human profession of teaching.

Fittingly, in the opening article, O R Rao scans the vast landscape of life on earth and describes the human quality of ‘self consciousness’ as bringing in a new dimension of being on earth. The ability to self-consciously question the ‘self’—*What is my nature? Why is there suffering?*—sets the human being apart from other creatures. ‘The elephant with all its intelligence and capacity for empathy remains an elephant and nothing else. It does not question itself or the world.’ It is human beings who have the potential for transformation. Quite without intention, yet pushing a similar point, the journal concludes with a conversation between Steve Smith and Alok Mathur on how the human mind occupied with measurement, scores and placings, leaves the ‘terrain of the human psyche untouched’. Without questioning the hidden depths that control our everyday behaviour, ‘we shall remain barbarians at heart’ avers Steve

at the beginning of this exchange. They go on to explore the place of meditation and inquiry in the field of education.

Between the first and last pages of the journal are a wide range of articles that explore and grapple with essential questions of being a teacher and a human being. Based on their lived experiences, each writer seeks clarity on different dimensions of teaching and learning.

Govind Krishnamoorthy, a clinical researcher and practicing psychologist, describes how fear is so entrenched in our educational institutions that responses of competitiveness, one-upmanship or anxious withdrawal may not be seen as simply 'failures of character' but as 'predictable responses of a nervous system that has been trained to see danger everywhere.' Drawing on his time as a student in Krishnamurti schools, he suggests that a different kind of education might prepare us to meet life differently. As if glancing off this article, there is a significant realization for a teacher who had been trained to say 'no' in his earlier years of teaching. After years of saying 'no', Aaron Gardner found the freedom to say 'yes' to children. This, 'the gift of saying yes', liberates both teacher and student.

Jessica Kokkebaecker marvels at the curiosity and depth of experience which young children bring to learning. She strives to find a space for learning that connects children to the environment, the community and to themselves; in which children are invited to 'think, feel, act and reflect.'. Speaking of her work with older students, Vidya Premkumar says that the 'boundaries between classroom, laboratory, and outdoors are porous... Biology does not belong to one space. It moves, just as life does.' Her account of various contexts in and around the school campus, which her students engage with, is indicative of the subtle processes of observation and learning about the living world. She remarks that, when this subject is taught within the four walls of a classroom with a focus on recall, fear narrows observation and curiosity gives way to caution,. She reminds us that learning does not announce itself loudly and instead happens in quiet moments of attention. While the forest has always been imagined as a 'grand green space' far away from our urban lives, V Arun's article brings a particular forest vividly to life. Teachers and students enter this forest as learners and stumble upon new lenses to look; new ways to understand the forest intimately. He concludes by sharing that 'Life [in the forest] is so rich and one cannot wait to experience it to the fullest.'

Teaching is a deeply ‘human profession’. It is in relationship that one teaches and learns. The ability to observe, to listen, to be sensitive to the moment is what makes learning a living process. Ashwin Prabhu recognizes how closely students can be invited to observe a historical structure or artefact when they are in direct contact with it, and the teacher is not looking for the one right answer. In teaching Physics, Harpreet Hura realizes that if he intervenes too early ‘I force a premature collapse of a student’s thought process’. As a language teacher, Bhaween Sawlani feels it is important to inculcate in students the facility to find the words that express one’s thoughts effectively in a manner he likens to ‘a sculptor who works on his material’. When selecting picture books with stories reflecting cultural diversity that may develop empathetic responses in children, Keerthi Mukunda suggests that a sensitive appraisal of the texts and pictures is required of the teacher. She needs to keep in mind that every story is ‘one slice of a truth and every voice, one representation.’

There are difficult questions too that the teacher must ask as they relate with their students. Krithika Thandapani notices as she watches children how easy it is to make assumptions, to interpret a child’s behaviour quickly and how these ‘overshadow the quieter perceptions’ that become visible when she pauses to listen. Vivek Mishra would perhaps concur. He says that schools need spaces that breathe, where children can ‘unfold’ at their own pace, where not everything has to be loud and visible. V Rajiv on his part notices ‘diminishing spaces’ for sustaining fuller conversations among people and feels that such spaces of conversation within academic learning hold a deep place in a student’s life.

Education ‘is not a preparation for life , education is life itself’, said John Dewey. Can schools be places where every child belongs? A place where their social and emotional well-being is as significant as academic learning? When we do not pack education into convenient boxes with well-defined outcomes, we might discover innate capacities which could otherwise ‘atrophy’. We need to create spaces that allow for the emergence of a quality of intelligence that is ‘harder to name and still harder to find’. These are some of the issues that Rina Raphael, Sharanya Rengarajan, and Shikha Dutt raise for readers, even as they report on different initiatives in schools that they are part of.

Drawing from his work in a ‘small school’ Sharad Jain insists that a school does not emerge from any individual’s vision or efforts. Instead, a

school is a shared space involving teachers, children and parents equally. 'One needs to talk together, challenge, be challenged and change when needed—to co-create a living environment of inquiry'.

Two significant concerns occupy Indian society as well as the world today. Responding to a reader's question on what might nurture intrinsic motivation in students from the varied sections of a highly stratified society like India, Proteep Mallik writes from his experience at a university that aims to promote social justice and equity. He feels that, for students from different sections of society, colleges must attempt to build a connection between the classroom and the broader surroundings and that this may bridge the 'cloistered life of a school pupil and the independent life of a college-going adult.' Responding to the ongoing 'Climate Crisis,' Pallavi Phatak argues that traditional schooling 'is designed around futures that are collapsing' and makes the case for an urgent shift in our consciousness as well as educational aims. She proposes 'climate education' as a necessary tool to till the soil that could lead to a more inclusive and regenerative future.

Finally, as a centrepiece in this Journal, the reader is invited to accompany seven teachers as they introspect on the teachers who have influenced them, and on persons and situations that have shaped them both as teachers and as human beings.

We hope that the honesty of inquiry in these writings, and their collective acknowledgment of the vastness of the field of education, may leave the reader with new questions, some insights and an empathy for our human condition.

Jayashree Nambiar

June 2026

The Only Journey is the One Within¹

○ R RAO



*The primordial one pierced the senses outward and hence
the person looks outwards and not inwards.*

*But a brave spirit with inward looking eyes desiring
immortality looked within and found the immortal self.*

Katha Upanishad (Chapter 4 verse 1)

There is no more steely barb than that of the Infinite.

Charles Baudelaire

All living beings, from plants to unicellular organisms and sea anemones, from butterflies and glow worms to hummingbirds, from alligators to dolphins, from cats, dogs and horses to apes and human beings wish to continue living, and to flourish. Every minute of their lives they do all they can to live and flourish. And in this they succeed according to the sensorimotor and mental abilities they possess, and to the extent that outer circumstances allow.

In this respect, the appearance of human beings on the earth in the course of evolution marks a break in the order of sentient beings. Over the millennia, one primate became a biped with an upright posture and gait, a highly developed front brain, and an opposable thumb with hands that could grasp and manipulate objects into tools. This being, which lived in packs like wolves and apes, developed not only a long-term memory, but also a collective memory. It also developed the ability to articulate a huge range of meanings using an incredible range of sounds (including the intensely beautiful mix of harmonic and melodious sounds called music); all this was made possible by a highly developed and sensitive larynx. This was a radical break from the range of abilities of other sentient beings.

Over the course of the next few millennia, this member of the genus *Homo* seems to have outlived other similar sub-species. *Homo sapiens* developed all the abilities unique to them, such as generalising repeated experiences into abstract thoughts, representing the thoughts visually in written languages, and further inferring rules of correct thinking or logic. In the course of time, these unique abilities of rational thinking resulted in the building of large bodies of knowledge, leading ultimately to the huge complex artefact called modern globalised civilisation.

All this is not to suggest that human beings are completely unique among sentient beings. Even the smallest of living beings display an astonishing intelligence which enables them to flourish. A wild mother duck will feign lameness to draw the attention of a stalking hyena, and at the same time guide her chicks towards a lake so that they can swim away to safety and she can follow. Elephants, giraffes and chimpanzees in the wild 'mourn' their dead and some domesticated elephants even 'mourn' the death of their trainers. Dogs are proverbial for their loyalty to their masters and are known to have risked their lives in order to save young children from grave danger.

Many sentient beings can be clever, skilful, intelligent, empathetic and altruistic, but they know nothing about questioning themselves or the world. They are comfortable in being what they are, living comfortably in their skins. They are a part of nature and are completely embedded in it. Even their altruism and capacity for empathy is of an unselfconscious kind. The fleeing gazelle doesn't question, as far as we know, why it must exist in order to satisfy the leopard's hunger; neither does the leopard feel the slightest guilt for killing the gazelle. Tennyson might have been shocked at the sight of 'Nature red in tooth and claw,' but neither a predator that is 'red in tooth and claw', nor its prey feel any such emotion.

With the appearance of the human being on earth, there was a radical change, not just in its leap over the abilities of other sentient beings but also in its fundamental nature. This change can only be called an existential one, because this being questioned the nature of its own existence and the nature of the world it found itself in. This being was not only conscious, but also conscious of being conscious; it was self-conscious. This is not to say that human beings are 'superior' to other beings—only that our place in the order of beings is different.

Self-consciousness enabled this new being to face itself and ask *What or who is this 'I' that I call myself, and what is my nature?* This 'I' also questioned the world itself, asking *Who or what are you? What is your substance, and whereof are you made?* This being also wanted to know why at all there should be gratuitous suffering in the world both for itself and for other sentient beings. It asked *What is death and is there life after death?* This was a break into a totally new dimension of Being.

This specific 'human question' is found thus at the very dawn of recorded history in the *Nasadiya Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*:

Then even nothingness was not, nor existence,
There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.
What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping?
Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?
But, after all, who knows, and who can say
Whence it all came, and how creation happened?
The gods themselves are later than creation, so who knows truly
whence it has arisen?
Whence all creation had its origin, he, whether he fashioned it or
whether he did not, he, who surveys it all from highest heaven,
He knows—or maybe even he does not know.

Extracts from Wendy Doniger's translation of the
Rig Veda Sukta (circa 1500 BCE)

Here we see a being who is a part of nature but not completely defined by it, because the being has also confronted nature with questions like 'Whence is all this?', 'What am I and what am I doing here?' or 'Is there a transcendental infinite dimension of which this world is a manifestation?' In such questioning, the human being is unique. Baudelaire's steely barb has pierced the human heart and soul. These and other similar questions were asked in other civilizations of antiquity, such as in ancient Greece and China. And there are no immediate answers forthcoming to these questions.

This was the turning point, the radical existential break away into a new dimension that human beings landed in—the dimension of 'not knowing.' For we do not know the answers to the fundamental questions of who or what we are, why we are here, and what the universe is. In Ancient Greece, the Delphic oracle's dictum was 'Know thyself,'—

but legend has it that she also declared that Socrates was the wisest man in Greece because he alone 'knows that he knows nothing'.

The space in which we ask the question 'Who am I?' is an empty space, a space of 'not knowing'. This space, seemingly specific to human beings, offers an opportunity for us to fulfil a specific human destiny — that of being free of any identification and fixed self-definition, unlike other beings whose identities are fixed by nature itself. Here the statement by Krishnamurti on the nature of human beings is relevant. He says:

Any species that specializes obviously comes to an end. The greatness of man is that he cannot specialize. He may specialize technically, but in structure he cannot specialize. An acorn seed is specialized—it cannot be anything but what it is. But the human being does not end completely. There is the possibility of constant renewal; he is not limited by specialization.

J. Krishnamurti, *The Book of Life*, 21st November

Here as I understand it, 'specialization' means a fixed nature. The elephant with all its intelligence and capacity for empathy remains an elephant and nothing more. It does not question itself or the world. This is true for all beings except human beings, who are not 'specialized' in this way, for they have gone beyond this specialized equipment in their self-conscious questioning of the self.

Thus the free space in which human beings find themselves is an opportunity for them to be free to look clearly at different emerging life situations as time passes, and to respond with clear vision and appropriate actions. In other words, here is the opportunity to take responsibility for our lives and actions. As long as we remain in this free space, we can look at all the events that pass through the mind non-judgmentally, or in other words, with 'choiceless awareness'.

It is impartial looking that makes possible the acceptance of painful or uncomfortable truths. The history of science shows that however painful it might have been to accept, for example, that a sun-centred universe explains the movements of the planets much better than an earth-centred one, the fact eventually had to be accepted. In science, such impersonal choiceless looking has been relatively easy. Though the Newtonian system had been well established for over two centuries, it was relatively easy for scientists to recognise its limits at the turn of the 19th century. We now accept the concept of space-time in relativity theory and even accept weird

concepts in quantum mechanics like ‘probability waves’ and ‘quantum entanglement’ because they are successful and bring us the internet and laser surgery! It is this pragmatic success that makes it possible for non-scientists to accept the weird theories of quantum physics.

It is apparently very difficult for us to be impersonal in our lived experience and exercise choiceless awareness of the thoughts and emotions that pass through our minds. When we lose sight of that choiceless awareness and identify with one or other of the elements in our consciousness, the free space which is our inheritance contracts, and our minds continue to run in a narrow groove.

1 Rainer Maria Rilke



Quantum mechanics and experiments with particles have taught us that the world is a continuous, restless swarming of things, a continuous coming to light and disappearance of ephemeral entities. A set of vibrations...A world of happenings, not of things.

— Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*

Education as Preparation: Observing the Mind That Fear Organises

GOVIND KRISHNAMOORTHY



With the competitive education we receive which engenders fear, we are all burdened with fears of some kind, and fear is a dreadful thing which warps, twists and dulls our days

—J. Krishnamurti¹

There is a question that is asked of those of us who were educated in Krishnamurti schools. Family members ask it when they notice we do not rush to compete. Employers ask it if they expect urgency or desperation from us. *Were you prepared for life after school? Can you cope with the demands of the ‘real world’?* We may even ask it of ourselves in moments of doubt or failure. Were those years that we spent learning to observe, to listen and to stay with uncertainty years in which something important was withheld from us? Perhaps it was the armour that everyone else seems to have been issued?

What follows is not a defence of Krishnamurti education, nor a claim that it succeeds where other models fail. It is an attempt to trace, through my time at KFI schools, the relationship between what the school cultivates, and the qualities that education makes possible.

I recall spending many hours as a primary school child with my father in Vasanta Vihar in Chennai. The greenery and silence. Oversized headphones wrapped around my head as I watched videos of Krishnamurti speaking to attentive students. I can still recall his voice, its tone and cadence—though I am sure that much of what he said went over my head. In the discussions that followed with my parents, one message stayed: competitiveness in education engenders fear. The fear and worry that a child feels about an academic outcome or a sporting performance is not just a product of that child’s personality or family background. It is a structural feature in most dominant educational institutions.

Fear

Within the question of preparedness is an assumption about what the world rewards: urgency, competitiveness and

the readiness to outperform others. The question of preparation is really a question about comparison—*am I ahead or behind?*—and it assumes that readiness means readiness for competition. A world shaped by neoliberal forces—the expansion of markets, the commodification of time and the reduction of human worth to productivity—does reward these things. Fear is instilled early in educational institutions through comparison, and most powerfully by fusing external evaluation with self-worth. When a child's sense of who he or she is becomes inseparable from where they stand in relation to others, the self is no longer something to be explored but something to be defended. This is often done because we assume, as adults, that the world will demand it of the child.

To a developing mind, the sustained pressure of competitive environments, sensitizes it to threat. Where a single stressful experience might pass, prolonged exposure to evaluation trains the nervous system to detect and amplify the slightest signs of a threat: a teacher's tone of voice; a list of ranks posted in the classroom; a classmate who finishes first.² This is not desensitization but rather its opposite; not the gradual dulling but rather a sharpening of the fear response. A child does not grow accustomed to such pressure. Instead, the pressure grows until threats appear even in benign situations. The

compulsions that follow—urgency, competitiveness, belittling, bullying, cheating, withdrawal—are not failures of character. They are the predictable responses of a nervous system that has been trained to see danger everywhere. In this way, fear becomes an organizing principle: it shapes what children attend to, what they avoid and how they make decisions. Over time, the compulsions that this generates—the desire to perform well, compare oneself with others and secure approval—come to feel like needs.

As I reflect on my time at Krishnamurti schools, I can see that the educational environments there did not amplify these signals. Without constant ranking and comparison, my nervous system was not trained to be in a permanent state of vigilance. Having always felt psychologically safe in school, I was somehow able to recognize signs within myself if an environment triggered feelings of urgency and fear. I would mentally take a step back and observe it. Through this ability to observe, I developed what psychologists call 'discriminant learning'—the ability to tell the difference between environments that genuinely require a fear response and those that do not.³

When the time came to choose a course of study at university, I perceived pressure from those around me to pursue something 'safe'—something that would secure better employment and status. Instead, I made what

some called a ‘risky’ choice. I chose to study psychology, a path that has led me to conduct clinical work and research with children and adolescents who have experienced maltreatment, childhood trauma and abandonment. Understanding how to help these children and those around them has become the focus of my professional life. My journey has prompted me to reflect on my upbringing, and the role of fear and courage in it.

Courage is often imagined in adversarial terms in competitive environments: the boldness to outperform others, take on more responsibility and push harder. But there is another kind of courage that is quieter and more difficult to name which has nothing to do with combativeness. It is the courage to listen to one’s own voice despite external pressures and the internal compulsions they produce. Not indifference to security, but enough distance from the cues of fear to ask what one is really drawn to do. My education did not make me immune to pressure but gave me the capacity to disengage from pressure long enough to make a choice that was mine.

It has not all been smooth sailing. I was slow to develop the reflexive competitiveness that professional environments may sometimes reward. In contexts that demanded combativeness, often mistaken for capability, I was at a disadvantage. But I could engage fully

in tasks and challenges without having to cope with corrosive fear. This has served me well in learning and growing both professionally and personally. I achieved this not because I never felt fear, but because fear was not allowed to determine what I should do. The most compelling effect of fear’s influence is its control of a child’s attention.

Attention

If fear is the engine of competitiveness and conditioning, directed attention is its steering mechanism. Fear-inducing environments do not merely frighten—they direct the mind. They capture one’s attention and orient it toward the threat of failure, the promise of approval and the measure of one’s standing against others. In this state, one is not paying attention to the world but rather to a system—scanning it for danger, calculating risk and managing perceptions to one’s benefit.

Consider a workplace meeting. Within minutes the room sorts itself along invisible lines of power: who speaks first; whose ideas are acknowledged; whose silence is read as deference and whose as dissent. The rejection of an idea becomes a verdict on one’s abilities. A grant or tender not funded becomes a personal indictment. Beneath surface collaboration is a constant, subconscious awareness of a threat that has nothing to do with physical danger. Attention is focussed on self-protection, reading the room

and managing how one is perceived. The real world outside disappears. This is attention in captivity, which clearly does not end when schooling does. Fear becomes the invisible grid on which adult life is plotted.

What happens when attention is perpetually oriented toward such a threat? Russ Harris calls the downstream consequence ‘experiential avoidance’: the attempt to avoid or escape uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations, even when doing so is costly or self-destructive.⁴ We develop strategies to flee the discomfort that life inevitably delivers, often through distraction or overwork. The avoidance works briefly but it narrows one’s life. We are so busy fleeing discomfort that we lose touch with what matters. The individual whose attention was controlled by fear in childhood becomes an adult whose time is spent in avoiding danger. The mechanism is the same: something outside the self determines where we pay attention.

I think about myself in Vasanta Vihar as a child. Much of what Krishnamurti said did not make sense to me then. Yet something else was happening. I was being attentive, but not because I had been told. No one was going to test me on it. There were no marks for noticing trees; no reward for being the most silent. My attention was simply available. That, I suspect, is what I learned without knowing it — not the content of the talks, but

the quality of attention that the space around them made possible. And crucially, a lived experience of knowing that one can return—both physically and emotionally—to a place where one can be curious, make mistakes and fail, while continuing to be loved, cared for and accepted. While this is often described as courage and resilience, it is perhaps something quieter: a knowledge of being able to seek refuge in those parts of ourselves that such experiences create.

A Krishnamurti education offered something that directly countered the pattern of captured attention. In the silences of *Asthachal*, and those that followed morning assemblies; in the pauses built into the rhythm of the school day, we were given space—not instruction, not technique—but space to sit with whatever was there. The silence was not a task. It was an opening. In these moments, my attention was not being directed. It was being returned. I was allowed to discover that I had agency over my attention — and I could attend to my thoughts and feelings without feeling compelled to act on them.

What this practiced, without naming it, was something that contemporary psychology might call diffusion—the capacity to observe one’s own experience without being fused with it.⁴ We were learning, in the body and not just the intellect, that a thought is not a command, and a feeling is not

an emergency. That discomfort can be noticed, sat with, and allowed to pass. Krishnamurti himself insisted that this quality of attention cannot be manufactured: 'This attention then comes about naturally, easily, when you know you are inattentive. When you are aware that you are inattentive, not giving attention, being aware of that fact *is* being attentive, and you have nothing else to do.'⁵ The silences of the school day were not exercises in concentration. They were openings in which inattention could notice itself.

In the face of failure and loss that accompany adult life, I found myself able to attend to and observe the feelings that accompanied them. I did not need to seek refuge in destructive or unhealthy behaviours to avoid the pain. Not because I was disciplined, but because those silences had taught my nervous system something before my intellect could name it: that difficulty is survivable—that feelings, even terrible ones, move through you if you let them. Feelings of fear and sadness when they are recognised, do not lead to a fear of the emotions themselves. They remain feelings, now arising and then passing. The attention I learned to give to my own inner life is the same attention I learned to give to the world around me.

Freedom

I find myself most vulnerable to fear as a parent. When I think of my daughter, I wonder: *Will she be safe? Will she be*

happy? How will she manage the trials of the future? The fear starts before the child is born and never fully subsides. Love for a child makes you vulnerable to fear in a way that nothing else does—because the stakes feel absolute. Insecurities about your own childhood, anxieties about your role as a parent, worries about your child's future—trap you into cycles of being reactive, controlling and punitive. 'You need to learn this' or 'Other children your age are already doing this.' The language appears ordinary, but the mention of 'falling behind' turns the parent's attention into a catastrophe for the child, who registers not the words but the parent's fear. The child does not hear 'Practice your reading', but rather 'Something is wrong, and it might be you.'

This is how fear is transmitted. A parent whose own education instilled an intolerance of uncertainty—whose nervous system was trained to scan for threats and act immediately—cannot easily hold still in the presence of a child's difficulty. Captive to their own fear, such parents cannot be fully present for their children. The child, in turn, learns to recognize the structure of the parent's anxiety, sees that the world requires vigilance, and that falling behind is dangerous because any difficulty is a sign of deficiency. In this way, a parent's unexamined fear becomes a child's first curriculum. It sensitises the child to a looming threat,

not through any specific experience but from noting the parent's tone, timing, and urgency. The fear becomes an atmosphere. Much of this is true for educators as well—because their fear of a poor performance from students leads them to build systems that perpetuate fear and compulsion. In this way, fear is passed on from institutions to parents and educators, and then onto the child. Each generation instils in the next the same intolerance of uncertainty, the same captivity of attention.

Theories of attachment describe a core caregiving capacity they call 'being with': the ability to remain emotionally present with a child's distress—their fear, sadness, frustration—without rushing to fix, distract, minimise or control it.⁶ 'Being with' is not permissiveness. It is not passively letting things happen. It is staying connected to what the child is feeling, even when that feeling is uncomfortable for the parent. When a caregiver can do this, the child's stress response settles—not because the difficulty has been removed, but because it is being held within a relationship. Over time, the child learns something profound: that emotions are tolerable, meaningful and manageable. The common reaction is for the adult to move too quickly into problem-solving or reassurance—to signal, without meaning to, that strong feelings are unsafe or unacceptable.

The Krishnamurti schools did not teach me 'being with' by name. Instead,

I had a lived experience of it: the sense that I could meet what I was seeing, hearing, feeling without the compulsion to manage or resolve it. That capacity lent a certain emotional sovereignty—the ability to be present to difficulty without being governed by it. In culture classes, we were asked not to consume ideas but to just sit with them and notice what arose in us without rushing to judge, categorise or explain it away. The task, if it was a task at all, was to stay with the discomfort of not knowing what you thought, to manage the uncertainty of having a response that was just forming. Not the sharpening of argument but the willingness to remain open before reaching a conclusion. 'Being with' asks something simple and very hard: that you do not let your own fear organise the space between you and your child.

When I can meet my own fear without being driven by it, my daughter is released from the obligation to carry that fear. The space between my child and me opens. What fills it is not instruction or correction, but something closer to what the child needs: playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy. These are moments of freedom—in which the child is not being coerced or conditioned but allowed to attend to one's own experience. To explore rather than defend, to be interested rather than afraid. Perhaps this is the education I received, and what my child requires:

the freedom to struggle, to fail and to feel without the additional burden of managing a parent's anxiety.

Conclusion

I believe attending Krishnamurti schools did not eliminate urgency or spare me from pain, nor did it grant me a permanent calm. What it did was simpler, and more lasting. It taught me to recognise when competition is driven by fear rather than genuine purpose. It gave me the capacity to stay present to difficulty—failure, loss, heartbreak—without collapsing into self-critical, ruminative thoughts or fleeing into avoidance. It showed me, even as a parent, that the gift of freedom one can offer a child is not from the removal of strife and difficulty, but the refusal to let fear govern a child's world.

Krishnamurti wrote: 'The observer is the observed; the thinker is thought. There is no thinking without thought; there is no thinker without all the thought that he has collected.'⁷

What does it mean to say the observer is the observed? It means that the fear I carry is not separate from me — it is not a problem to be solved by better preparation. The self that asks, '*Am I ready?*', and the fear that drives the asking, are the same movement of thought. When we are truly attentive to the world that drives these questions, the fear and its related compulsions dissolve, allowing us to be free. This is not because the question is answered, but because the separation it assumes between self and world no longer holds.

The question of preparation is not whether we are ready for the world. We are, all of us, the world itself.

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The Freedom of Living and Learning

AARON GARDNER



When I began teaching at Oak Grove nine years ago, I was already a seasoned teacher with fifteen years under my belt, and I thought I had it all figured out. If you had asked me back then why I teach, I would have said that teaching is all about enabling children to find their voice. While that is still at the core of my educational philosophy, that empowering children to find and use their voice is paramount, the ‘why’ I teach, and perhaps more importantly the ‘what’ I even do has shifted, and I realize I actually have nothing figured out—which is exactly the point.

All of us went to school in some form or another: some of us excelled and competed for a space at the top; some of us coasted along happy with average marks; some barely made it through; some probably did not. The point is, we all learned something: we learned that we had to beat someone at something; we learned that if we played our cards right, we could be as invisible

as we felt; we learned to tie our self-worth to our grades, our clothing, our athleticism and our popularity.

The commonality between all these things is that learning was happening even though it was outside of ourselves, and living was happening—but we rarely saw the two things together: both living *and* learning. To do both, we needed the space and opportunity to look inside ourselves, to really notice and observe who we are. This is the gift I have been given at this school as an educator, and it is what I have come to know as my role. I am not here to ‘Teach’—that is, to impart some kind of knowledge to a child. The ‘what’ I do is ‘Learn’—that is, I learn how to facilitate a space for my students in which real self-awareness happens, where it is safe to try, safe to succeed, and safe to fail.

In the nine years I have been here at Oak Grove, I have been asked several times what the difference is in teaching at a school like ours. My response has always been simply that I can say ‘yes’

to children more often than I have ever been able to do in my career, after years of saying 'no' without consideration. With the tight timelines, rigid rule structure backed up by rewards and punishments, and prescribed curricula that had no room for creativity or depth, my public-school experience allowed for very little exploration outside these bounds.

During my first year here, a 7th grader named Makel asked if he could go jump in the bioswale at lunch time on one of the very few rainy days of our southern California school year. My practiced response was an automatic 'no', followed by his response of 'why?' It was not a *why* in the whiny adolescent vein, the *why* of someone who knows exactly why.... Instead, it was a *why* full of curiosity that warranted some observation and some questioning from me.

'Well....,' I paused, considering his proposal, 'what are you going to do once you're all wet?'

'I have my basketball shorts,' he replied promptly.

'You will be pretty cold'.

'Maybe, but I have seen these fill up with rain ever since I can remember and always wanted to see what it was like'.

'Hmm, I guess you better find out'.

And again, it seems like a little thing. But it is this observation that mattered: the way this child looked at himself. His act of independent thought

and curiosity, of taking a risk within the confines of safety; accepting the possibility that he might get soaked whilst he was still *inside* the classroom. To my mind, that was on par with volunteering an idea about Romeo and Juliet when he was not sure of the answer or writing a poem without knowing how. Just his willingness to try was important.

Moreover, the gift he afforded me as an educator in this moment was staggering. It was the gift of a pause for reflection. His sincere question was an opportunity to take in the moment as it truly was, not as an act of mischief to be quashed, but as an exploration of real curiosity that deserved more than a simple rejection.

Junior high students often come across as a paradox: full of the desire to push against boundaries and test out new ideas, while at the same time feeling an intense need to find belonging within a group. We see it in the choices they make with music, fashion, friendships and most other areas of their lives. So, it is only natural that this paradox would present itself in the classroom as well. In fact, the most exciting and inspiring thing I have had the privilege to witness as a classroom teacher is when students design their own solutions to problems that arise. This could be as simple as tweaking a writing prompt to fit their interest to a topic (*I really want to write about the societal reasons why there are no girls in*

'Lord of the Flies'), or a more involved exercise (...instead of a reading log, I would like to make my own book review website. I feel like it would make me be more serious about it). Basically, the student wants to be a part of a class goal or project but in a way that has his or her personal signature on it, just to stand out and fit in at the same time.

In my previous experience of teaching at a large public school, I found myself in a similar conundrum — how to foster a sense of individuality and exploration in an environment dictated by conformity. Most of the time it felt frustrating, I was able to see small moments of expression, but anything challenging the structure of the curriculum or assignment usually came up against the wall of common assessment and testing. Just as I had done initially with Makel and the bioswale, I found myself, more often than not, saying 'no'.

As I have said, teaching humanities at Oak Grove has presented me with the gift of saying 'yes'. The small size of our classes and the commitment to inquiry allows for both small scale and larger opportunities for student-led design and problem solving. While every assignment and project does not ask the students to completely form their own learning, all students have the opportunity to inform their own learning as they develop their strengths and interests. As I moved through the first few years here, I increasingly found

myself wondering how to encourage and foster this type of internal motivation and turn it into action.

With the new initiative of advisory time in middle school a few years back, came an opportunity for implementing an independent project that might provide both freedom and structure for the eighth grade. Our existing junior high internship, where students choose a local artisan or business to learn for a day, meshed with the mentor component of the program, and being the eighth-grade advisor allowed me to work closely with those students to help them navigate the challenges and help them use the opportunity that their chosen interest presented. What was important, whether students were attempting a project that was big or small, was that they were able to explore learning without boundaries. More importantly, they had the freedom to fail and retry, and to share their findings along the way.

The parameters of this project were simple and wide open. First, the students needed to choose something that they were interested in but not proficient at. Usually, this involves a presentation of a few of their ideas early in the year, followed by the collection of feedback from peers and advisors about which might be the best fit. Next, they identified a mentor—an adult in the community other than their parents who had expertise in some aspect of the project and who would be available

to answer questions. Finally, they had to be completely independent in their endeavor, from funding to completion. So, while mentors and other adults could help them learn the use of a tool or a specific skill, it was hands off when it came to the project itself. Thus, an adult could demonstrate how to use a bandsaw but not cut the wood for a participant's project.

The first time the students presented these year-long projects. I was stunned by the variety of their ideas. I stood across the table from the 8th grade girl, her eyes sparkling as she recounted how she submitted a successful proposal and implemented a plan to include junior high artists in one of the largest high school art shows in the city. She proudly described how she partnered with a charity that connected impoverished artisans in developing countries with the art show to help raise money for them as well. She spent time considering each of my questions and was impassioned and thorough in all her answers. The same went for student after student: the boy who built his own bike from scratch, the girl who created a line of lip balms to sell, the student who created a stand-up comedy routine and performed it at adult comedy open mics, a boy who learned how to turn a lathe and built his own custom baseball bats. The common thread linking these projects was that the students had come up with original ideas, found themselves

mentors, documented their progress and designed a project on their own. The room was filled with a palpable sense of pride and motivation stemming from the students' success in following their own interests.

In *Education and the Significance of Life*, Krishnamurti writes: 'While one is young is the time to investigate, to experiment with everything. The school should help its young people to discover their vocations and responsibilities and not merely cram their minds with facts and technical knowledge; it should be the soil in which they can grow without fear, happily and integrally'.

I am always extremely excited to see what discoveries our 8th graders make as they explore their varied interests in whatever form they choose. As a teacher, perhaps the most difficult thing for me is to divorce myself from the outcome that a student's interest may arrive at. The outcome in this project is simply not as important as the *process*—the investigation of an interest, no matter how fleeting that interest may be, is paramount.

Many a time in the classroom, students' interests are dismissed as distractions—as being secondary to the 'real' learning at hand. I was hoping that with this project our eighth graders would see that their extracurricular avocations were as significant a form of learning for them as constructing a good essay or understanding a difficult

concept. As Krishnamurti describes the process of distraction: ‘Follow the wandering, the distraction, find out why the mind has wandered; pursue it, go into it fully. When the distraction is completely understood, then that particular distraction is gone. When another comes, pursue it also’.

At Oak Grove students will hear me say time and again that I would much rather have them design their own project idea, essay thesis or even a train of thought and fail spectacularly than do exactly what I ask for. Inevitably a student will then ask me if I want them to fail, and my answer to that is a resounding YES! It is quite literally the best way to learn—to have an idea, put it into action, watch it flounder and fail, then stop and reflect—and then either redesign the project or file it away to study another time.

So, Makel may have been really cold that afternoon, but he said ‘yes’, and he learned. Gianna may have been really scared to deliver her graduation speech, but when we put a picture of her horse in the tree behind the audience, she said ‘yes’, and learned she had the courage. Audrey may have cried for hours before finishing her essay, but

through tears she said yes, and wrote it all herself. Surya may not have known how to even hold a basketball before playing in high school, but he said yes to continuing, and hit a three-point shot in his final CIF game. My daughter Isla may have wanted to disappear within herself in middle school (having her own father as a teacher during adolescence was admittedly a challenge). But now as a senior here at Oak Grove, she has said ‘yes’ too, and is the student body president, immersing herself fully in everything she does. These kids, they all said yes because they felt safe here, safe to really see and observe who they were from the inside out.

This is not to say that Oak Grove is a magical place where nobody bases their learning on an imposed perspective, a perceived status, comparisons, or any other external factor. I work with adolescents and am under no illusion that this is their default experience of the world. However, it is to say that this is a magical place because inner learning is fostered in a way that inspires me every day and where kids are encouraged to look at themselves as they truly are. There is no learning more important than that.



A Foundation for Learning

Possibilities in Primary Education

JESSICA KOKKEBAEKER



Nobody can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

Khalil Gibran, *On Teaching*

‘Look, Akka!’ said Priya, ‘this leaning tree could be an “A” with the branch and me bending this way.’

‘Look, Akka, this caterpillar is making a “C”,’ said Sumit. ‘Oh, now it’s making an “I”.’

We were on one of our weekly nature walks at the beginning of a lesson block introducing the English alphabet. Every few minutes the class stopped because someone had found a new letter in their surroundings. My students were on a roll, and the walk was not really intended to go anywhere specifically. Ezhemalai the caterpillar had to be examined and held, but he rolled himself up into an ‘e’ and was then carefully placed off the path for his safety. We listened to the buzzing of the busy bees, and the children were intent on discovering which one might be the queen.

I often marvel at the depth of experience which young children bring with them to the classroom. Not only do they take the content of lessons into their play and other activities, but they relive and anchor it in the world around them. A peek into the experiential world of the growing child leaves me, as a teacher, humbled by the responsibility of making it as alive as possible so that they can build on these experiences in the future. We move at a slow pace on our walks, but every journey is rich and alive with new experiences.

In the early years, we are sowing seeds as educators, yet do not know what is likely to sprout from them. To continue with the metaphor, we wonder if our students will become tall trees that have strong trunks. How about the stems, leaves, and flowers on each of their branches? What about the

fragrance their flowers will emit? How can we teach so that children can be nurtured by schooling instead of being exhausted by it?

Educating children in this world is becoming an increasingly daunting task. Contemporary schooling, centred on abstract knowledge, rote memorization and standardised testing, risks losing sight of the very human nature of learning. On the other hand, experiential and embodied approaches offer something essential to students who are making sense of the world and their place in it. As Rabindranath Tagore advised, ‘the main objective of teaching is not to give explanations, but to knock at the doors of the mind.’ Beyond conventional cognitive activity, learning needs to also include the body, senses, and lived experiences that shape understanding. Such experiential learning lies at the heart of true learning and demands that the whole human being be engaged in it. Intellectual growth is inseparable from artistic and practical development as well as development of empathy and intuition, all of which are nurtured through lived, sensory-rich experiences.

Experiential learning isn’t merely ‘learning by doing’, but rather engaging students in situations where they must think, feel, act, and reflect. It connects them to their environment, to their community, and ultimately to themselves. Storytelling also plays a significant role in helping students

to form vibrant inner pictures in their minds, thus enabling them to connect deeply with meaning, possibility, and empathy. In my class, students listen to stories, retell them, and then draw them. Fairytales, for example, frequently present a clear depiction of ‘right and wrong’, but, as children grow older, they learn to make choices about what they truly feel is right rather than what they may think is expected of them.

I had once told the class the story of a tailor who, having killed a certain number of flies, had outsmarted a scary giant by writing ‘Seven in One Blow’ on his belt. This inspired a fearful student to ask his father to write the same on *his* belt. Whilst out on a nature walk, I noticed how firmly he clasped his belt as we passed a spot where he had previously seen a deer being attacked by dogs. This had frightened him deeply at the time. He was now able to find the courage to overcome his fear by using his imagination. Afterwards he said, ‘Last year I was small and couldn’t do that, but now I’m brave.’

Each year our school hosts a ten-day craft event where we invite other schools to come and learn the traditional skills of the local people. In the beginning, there is much milling about and organised chaos, but as the week progresses a deep satisfaction and contented energy can be felt throughout. The hands-on activities help to deeply connect the children to themselves and their environment.

Making a basket out of palm leaves or learning a local harvest dance, embodies learning in a way that a classroom lesson about harvesting cannot.

So, how can we teach our students in such a manner as to nurture the skills that will provide the foundation they require to adjust and adapt to the demands of our fast-changing and competitive world? It is understandable that parents feel anxious when faced by the demands of today's digital world, what with the advancements in Artificial Intelligence and the thinning out of many work opportunities. There is thus great pressure on them to ensure that their children succeed in life, and this leads to the conviction that children should read and write language and learn mathematics as early as possible. But does 'earlier' mean 'better' in this case? Is the child well-served if building a sound foundation is omitted? When constructing a house, the builder cannot start with the roof and build downwards. The same is true in the development of the child.

For the brain to develop in a healthy way, the young child needs to play — free, unsupervised, unguided play. As the renowned psychologist Peter Gray says, play is how children take control of their lives. There are distinct developmental milestones that a child goes through that directly affect connectivity in the brain, and their origin lies in fine and gross motor activities. If we imagine a child

sitting in front of a screen for whatever reason, the body is still and the visual stimulus is overwhelming. On the other hand, if we look at a child who spends time outside engaging with others in informal play, we see a child who is learning to negotiate with others and establish boundaries and realising that playing well can be almost as enjoyable as winning. In unsupervised play, there is no 'us and them'; there is no adult declaring what is right and wrong. There is communication between children, negotiation, and adjustment to circumstances. Is this not a better way to prepare for the future?

Today's digital world is rife with examples of children becoming addicted, developing a concentration deficit, and experiencing social or emotional difficulties. According to Gertraud Teuchert-Noodt, a professor of neurology at Bielefeld University in Germany, children who have grasped the world with their hands and feet are later better able to grasp concepts. These children have had time to play. Their nerve maps have developed in a healthy way and have not been overstimulated. She also says that the best preparation for the digital world is a digital-free childhood. The trend today, however, appears to be the overprotection of children from the real world coupled with under-supervised forays by them into the virtual world.

Manual skills, movement, and hands-on work are being increasingly

pushed to the margins in favour of abstract learning and now digital learning too, even though these skills and activities aren't optional extras. In early childhood, for example, crafts, drawing and learning through movement are essential to internalise knowledge. When we learn something new, we need to concentrate and be still to receive the new content. We are absorbing details. So if we take academic learning to be an 'in-breath', then it is evident that an 'out-breath' must follow. There needs to be a phase of relaxation, digestion of the content, and even forgetting, which is valuable. We need to be able to let the content go to allow something new to enter. Learning the arts or movement represent the 'exhale' stage. They enable a solid foundation for learning and provide space for the absorption of concepts and questioning.

We can once again apply the analogy of planting a seed in the soil. After preparing the earth, we dig a hole and place the seed in it. Then the seed needs to rest and given water and sunlight to sprout and grow. If we disturb the earth and add more seeds to the hole, the original seed will not grow properly. In the early years, much of what we teach is like preparing the

soil. We prepare a child's body and mind to be able to receive information, digest it, question its validity, and finally to apply it. This preparation is possible through the senses. A child who has been given the opportunity and confidence to cultivate his or her senses, move with grace, and develop a sense of balance, will be more aware and secure in themselves. This is akin to preparing the soil so that the seeds of learning can thrive. Ultimately, experiential and embodied learning is about the awakening of an inner sense of responsibility and agency.

When we lay a foundation based on lived experience, children can build on this and use their intuition as they get older to solve their problems. Learning becomes a joy even in the upper grades, when academic content is integrated with artistic and hands-on activities such as painting, music, gardening, and handicrafts. As they mature, they feel heard and seen if they can tackle themes and projects connected with their own unique experiences at each stage. After all, our goal is to guide students toward becoming human beings who are capable of using insights, being socially responsible, and making creative contributions to the world.



The Living Laboratory: Teaching Biology Through Relationship to Land

VIDYA PREMKUMAR



*A*t Good Earth School in Naduveerapattu, biology classes rarely begin with a diagram; they begin with the land. A class may walk out towards the paddy fields in the early part of the day, when the light is still soft and the soil holds the memory of water. Or students may gather near a compost pit that has been quietly working for months, transforming what was once discarded into something fertile and alive. Sometimes they sit with notebooks near a patch of wild growth, noticing leaf shapes, insect movement, or the way moisture collects in shaded areas. At other times they return to the laboratory where microscopes wait for them, and a drop of pond water reveals hidden worlds. The boundaries between classroom, laboratory and the outdoors are porous here. Biology does not belong only in one space; it moves, just as life does.

This is not a romantic idea imposed on the curriculum. It arises from a simple recognition that biology is the study of life and life does not organize itself into chapters: it grows, dies and decomposes; it adapts, responds and connects. When students encounter biology only in textbooks, charts and examinations, an essential element is often lost. The subject may become an exercise in memorization rather than an inquiry into living processes. The aim that quietly guides our work here is not only to teach biology effectively, but also to help students learn about life without reducing lessons to mere information.

Learning without fear

Many students arrive in middle school with a particular relationship to science. They have learnt, often unconsciously, that science is about giving the right answers, speed and performance. Biology in particular is sometimes seen as being dense with terminology: animal kingdoms, phyla,

classes, orders, families, genera, species. There are lists to be mastered, labels to be remembered. This avalanche of information engenders fear: the fear of forgetting; the fear of being wrong; the fear of falling behind.

When fear enters the classroom, observation narrows and curiosity gives way to caution. Students look to the teacher for confirmation before trusting what they see. When they learn to loosen their dependency on the teacher, they discover the true use of terminology by examining nature around them. Instead of beginning with definitions, students are first invited to observe—to handle a specimen, to notice its texture, structure and any patterns, and to describe it before naming it. When students peer at specimens through a microscope and struggle to identify what they are seeing, our response is not to correct them immediately. Instead, we ask more questions—What do you notice? What seems different? What repeats itself? Gradually, students begin to realize that biology is not a test of memory but an invitation to attention.

This shift is subtle, but profound. When fear recedes, students become more patient. They are willing to stay with uncertainty a little longer. They ask better questions. They begin to trust their own powers of observations. Learning then becomes an act of engagement, rather than of compliance.

The campus as a living laboratory

The living laboratory outside the classroom offers multiple ecological contexts that students can explore. Cultivated fields, uncultivated patches, water bodies, grazing areas, and built spaces exist alongside one another. For a biology teacher, this offers an unusual richness. Plant diversity does not need to be simulated; it is present and waiting.

In the laboratory, students begin with simpler plant forms. Thallophytes such as algae, often collected from nearby water sources, are observed under the microscope. Students observe the absence of differentiated structures and the way the organism exists as a whole—without roots, stems or leaves. This is not explained as a deficiency, but as an adaptation suited to a particular environment.

From here, they move to bryophytes. Mosses collected from shaded areas on campus become specimens through which students observe the beginnings of differentiation. The idea of vascular tissue is introduced not as a definition to be memorized, but through questions. How does water move? Why does this plant grow close to moist areas?

Pteridophytes offer another step. Ferns, with their visible vascular systems, invite discussion about transport, support, and the advantages that such structures confer. Students begin to see classification not as an arbitrary system, but as a way of tracing the evolutionary responses of living things to environmental challenges.

When gymnosperms and angiosperms are introduced, the focus shifts to reproduction. Flowers are not just studied; they are closely examined for their stamen arrangements, and the monadelphous, diadelphous and polyadelphous conditions in different species found on campus are noted. The terms are precise and scientific, but students adopt them easily because they arise naturally during the process of observation. Similarly, the distinction between monocots and dicots becomes tangible when students compare the leaves, stems and roots that they collect from their surroundings. Venation patterns are traced with fingers. Cotyledons are counted in seeds that will later be planted.

In each case, our campus is the source of the study material. The environment is not an example in the lesson. It is the lesson itself.

Animals, presence, and ethical attention

We approach animal diversity with the same sensibility.

Invertebrates are observed carefully, often in temporary containers that allow students to study structure and movement without harming specimens. Earthworms become teachers of soil health. Insects reveal adaptations that provoke wonder rather than disgust. Students learn to observe them without immediately categorizing animals as either being useful or harmful.

Vertebrate study raises questions of ethics and social responsibility. The livestock on our campus, particularly the cattle, are not treated as biological specimens. They are living beings with whom the school already has a relationship. When students learn about digestion, nutrition and microbial activity in ruminants, these lessons are grounded in care. The animals are introduced to students by their names; they are familiar and respected. This matters a great deal going forward.

When biology is divorced from ethical considerations, it risks becoming clinical and exploitative in nature. Here, students learn that observation does not require domination and that studying life forms comes with

responsibility. Such lessons are not delivered as moral instruction. They are absorbed through repeated encounters with living beings who are not abstract.

Cycles of life and learning

One of the most powerful teaching tools on campus is the compost pit. At first glance, composting appears simple. Organic waste is collected, layered, and left to decompose. But when students observe the process over time, biology comes alive in unexpected ways. They notice the heat generated by microbial activity, and observe changes in the texture, smell, and colour of the contents. They begin to see decomposition not as decay, but as transformation. These observations open the door to discussions about nutrient cycles of nitrogen, carbon and phosphorus being invisible pathways that sustain visible life.

Students then participate in preparing biofertilizers and biopesticides, learning about microbial cultures and natural deterrents. Green manures are grown and incorporated into soil, allowing students to see how plant matter returns nutrients to the earth. Making *Panchagavya* preparations (a concoction made by farmers from dairy products) helps them to link traditional practices with scientific understanding, thus bridging cultural knowledge with modern biology.

Paddy fields too offer lessons in water management, plant physiology, and seasonal rhythms. Students see how monocropping affects soil health, and how biodiversity supports resilience. Through such exploration, biology ceases to be an isolated subject and becomes an integrated understanding of systems. Most importantly, these practices are not presented as projects to be completed for assessment, but as ongoing processes. Students return to them repeatedly — taking note of changes, asking new questions and deepening their understanding. Time and seasonal change thus become their teachers.

The role of sustained observation

One of the less visible outcomes of this approach is a change in the quality of attention students bring to their work. In the beginning, many students want quick answers. They ask questions like: *what is this? is this correct? will this be in the exam?* Over time, a different kind of engagement emerges. Students linger longer over a specimen. They argue gently with one

another about interpretations. They notice inconsistencies. They accept that not everything fits neatly into categories. A student observing a leaf may suddenly remark on the way insects have eaten around certain veins. Another may wonder why moss grows more thickly on one side of a tree. Such observations are not always part of the syllabus, but they are deeply biological in nature. These moments signal a shift from passive reception to active inquiry.

Assessment, in such a context, becomes a delicate matter. Traditional testing has its place, but it cannot capture the full extent of learning that occurs through observation and engagement. Therefore, evaluation includes field journals, drawings, oral explanations, and reflective writing. Students are assessed on the clarity of their observations, the logic of their questions and their ability to connect concepts. This does not eliminate academic rigour; it redefines it.

The teacher as participant

In such a learning environment, the role of the teacher changes. The biology teacher is not the sole authority dispensing knowledge. She is a participant in the inquiry. She models the kind of attention that is needed. She admits to her uncertainty. She demonstrates how to look again when something does not make sense. This requires a different kind of preparation. Lessons cannot be fully scripted, because living systems do not always behave predictably. A plant may not flower on schedule. Rain may alter field plans. A compost pit may react unexpectedly to dry weather. Rather than treating these as mere disruptions, the reasons for them become part of the curriculum. This approach demands humility. It also demands that the teacher trusts students to handle complexity and believe that they can learn without constant control.

Discipline, in this context, is not enforced through fear or punishment. It arises from a shared purpose. Students know that careless behaviour affects living systems. The connection between nature and human responsibility becomes tangible.

Working within constraints

It would be dishonest to suggest that this approach is without challenges. Time is always limited. The syllabus is extensive. Examinations remain a reality. Seasonal changes do not always align with academic calendars. Resources must be managed carefully. There are times when

compromises are necessary. Certain topics require more direct instruction. Some assessments must follow prescribed formats. Safety considerations sometimes restrict exploration. The effort lies in ensuring that these constraints do not erode the central intent.

This requires constant reflection. It requires asking oneself, time and again, what is essential. Are students learning to think biologically? Are their powers of observation being strengthened? Are their fears being reduced? When these questions guide decision-making, even necessary compromises can be made without losing direction.

Education as relationship

At its heart, this way of teaching biology rests on a particular understanding of education. Education is not the transmission of information from one generation to another. It is the cultivation of a way of seeing. It is learning how to be in relationship with the world.

Biology, perhaps more than any other subject, offers an opportunity to nurture this relationship. When students learn about life while being surrounded by it, the separation between the knower and the known begins to dissolve. They begin to see themselves as participants in ecological systems, not as observers standing outside of them. This understanding does not arise from lectures; it grows slowly, through repeated encounters, careful attention and the freedom to inquire without fear. In such a context, learning is not a preparation for life. It is life itself, unfolding in the learner.

What truly matters

As I stand at the edge of a field, watching my students crouch over the soil, their notebooks forgotten for the moment, I am reminded that education does not always announce itself loudly; it often happens quietly, in moments of attention. A student notices something small and real. A question forms. A connection is made. In these moments, biology ceases to be a subject confined to textbooks and examinations. It becomes a way of understanding life and perhaps a way of living more attentively.



The World as Our Classroom: Learning the Forest Way

V ARUN



Building connections with nature

While most of us engage with the world through our five senses, centuries of living in increasingly urban settings have dimmed our sense perceptions. For forest-dwelling humans, not being fully alive with all their senses could cost them their lives; staying alert is a way of life for them. City dwellers though have no such need, except while crossing a road on foot or when driving a car. Whenever we find ourselves in the natural world, the sights and sounds there awaken these dormant senses to engage with the world differently. It is only an invitation and it is up to us to take it.

There is also this curious factor of how *knowledge* shapes our observation. Our minds seem to notice those things that they know about already but fail to register things we don't know about even if they are right under our noses! For years, I had been puzzled by things that were not part of my life during my early years spent in villages. For a person who is now obsessed with birdwatching, I have no memory of seeing birds as a child. How could I have not registered the presence of such colourful, vibrant, sweet-sounding creatures? That's how I realized that when one has no knowledge of something, one often fails to perceive it.

Humans have always had their own special connections with nature. A favourite tree, a curve in the stream with its particular set of trees, a sacred rock, a cave, a grove, a pasture for livestock, and so on. As we move further away from nature, we lose these connections. We simultaneously lose our *nature vocabulary*—a fact noticed by the nature writer Robert Macfarlane. He has recorded many such losses in his book *The Lost Words*. Thus, when city children are taken to a place which is still partly wild, they experience fear and even revulsion. A beetle or insect, instead of igniting their curiosity, just produces fear. What kind of world will they perceive

and live in? As educators, it is most concerning that children are growing up without such any connection to nature. However, this can be easily addressed when they are still young.

Strengthening connections and building layers

The best age is when children are in Kindergarten. Between three-and-a-half to four years, their connections with nature are alive. Their eagerness to play with soil, and to see, smell, touch and hear everything is delightful to see. And of course they love to put different things in their mouth to taste them too! At this age, they are so curious. Every little stone, twig, or fallen leaf on the path—objects which adults pay no attention to—is examined and felt and experienced with a sense of wonder. Walking and climbing in different terrains builds their motor skills. Very soon, they are more agile, which then gradually leads to a greater ability to handle challenging situations. We regularly see children who have not had this exposure in early childhood, who are awkward in their movements and not as comfortable in their own bodies.

At the age of eight or nine, children begin to pay more attention to living creatures, to recognise patterns and colours and identify specific birds and butterflies. When they draw these and colour the drawings, the details become clearer to them. They start noticing their finer features, and soon this quality of observation becomes second nature to them. This is the easiest way to initiate a deeper journey into nature. This ability to identify specific butterflies and birds opens up the possibility of teaching them about ecology. What specific plant(s) do the Blue Tiger butterflies feed on? Which plants do they lay their eggs on—is it always the same kind of plant, or a different one each time? What would the choice be based on? As the children gradually build their knowledge base, new insights arise and understanding comes alive. Suddenly, they see connections they have not noticed previously, as for instance, the connection between the Lime Swallowtail butterfly and plants of the *Rutaceae* (Lime) family. This emerged from my students' observations and not from a book.

Possible issues that may emerge here is learning the names of each species and understanding the limitations of naming. Often, when a bird or tree is recognised and named, a child is satisfied and moves on; observation seems to stop at that point. As teachers, we can help the student not get caught in mere naming but to use the name they now know to build further understanding. Learning especially takes on a new

flavour and holds greater possibilities when students realise that they need not depend only on secondary sources or books alone, and that each one can generate our own information base which can be a learning source for others too. Of course we can use other reliable sources to validate our findings.

Contributions to Citizen Science

With Citizen Science growing in importance, students of any age can make and record observations online helped by a teacher. *Season Watch* provides quizzes, clues and so on to help nature-lovers notice the seasonal changes in trees that are commonly found in their neighbourhoods. *eBird* encourages them to notice birds and record their observations. They also hold worldwide bird watching days, like the *Great Backyard Bird Count*. Millions from across the world participate providing critical data on wild bird numbers. When students participate in the eBird census, they contribute valuable data for scientific and conservation purposes and this is very empowering for them. For observations on flora and fauna and for learning, *iNaturalist* is a great forum. The students, teachers and other members of The Forest Way Trust, to which I belong, observe and record every bird we find in our region on *eBird*. We have also made a record of the trees and shrubs and a fair number of plants we have identified in *iNaturalist*, and students have played an important part in the process. This is an ongoing activity in which every new species that we come across is added. We also record phenological changes like flowering, fruiting, seeding, the sprouting of new leaves and leaf fall, through the year. If this sort of data is collected over years, it helps botanists to identify natural cycles as well as changes caused by climate change.

Our Western Ghats tree learning project

For students at Marudam Farm School, years of practicing observation and building observational skills come to the fore in their last few years in school, during our annual trip to the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary (GBS). Accompanied by our senior-most students, we teachers head to the sanctuary for a three-week period. We have been going to the GBS since our school's inception in 2009. Over the years, different batches of students have been able to observe and engage with birds, butterflies, various other insects, reptiles and amphibians.

In the beginning, we always felt a bit intimidated by the rainforest trees. While we loved being in the forest, we realized we were quite 'tree-

blind'. We didn't really know much about the forest. Then, during the field trip we took five years ago, Saji and Suresh who are members of the Green Phoenix team (an initiative of the GBS), generously invited us to go on a learning journey with them to get to know the trees of the region. They knew all about the trees, but they knew only the Malayalam, *Paniya* or *Kurchia* (regional languages) names—not the scientific ones—which we learnt. And they also gave us some new 'lenses' with which to look at the trees in the sanctuary.

Our first new lens—tree bark

The first obstacle to learning had been our inability to identify features that were easily recognizable. The leaves, fruit, and flowers of the trees in GBS are over a hundred feet above ground level. All we could see in front of us were towering tree-trunks! Saji and Suresh told us that many species could be recognised by closely observing the patterns on their bark. We were rather incredulous, but also quite intrigued. But . As we were totally unused to it, it took a bit of effort for us to imbibe this new learning tool. Gradually, we all began to notice patterns. Surprised and amused, we observed that the bark of certain trees peeled from above while some peeled from below. We realised that these were distinct features of specific species. Students also noticed for the first time that many trunks had lenticels through which they breathed, and when the lenticels were prominent, they too had distinct patterns.

Slowly, the magic of the forest unfolded for us. This was truly thrilling! In that first week, we learnt to identify at least ten distinct patterns. We now had the names of several trees in Malayalam, and we could identify an adult tree from its trunk though we often had no clue what the leaves, fruit or flowers of the trees were like! Our next challenge was to find the scientific name of the trees. We fell back on age-old resources—British botanical guides that were over a century old by J.S. Gamble and T.F. Bourdillon. And then we also used more recent Indian publications by S. G. Neginhal. None of these guides had photographs, but they did have descriptions and the local names of the trees or plants in different South Indian languages and dialects. Once we identified the local name of a tree, we matched it with its scientific name from these books. We also checked the Internet to see if the descriptions found in websites matched what little observations we had made. If it did, we noted down all the information that we could gather on the species. And so our own compendium on

the trees of the Western Ghat tree compendium tentatively began to take shape.

A second new ‘lens’: branching patterns

The next aspect that we began to pay attention to were the branching patterns. For many trees, branches grow in distinct geometric patterns: species like *Knema*, *Myristica* and *Garcinia* have branches which grow at ninety degrees to the main trunk; others like *Palaquim*, *Phoebe* and some *Elaeocarpus* have a unique curved pattern of branching. As we began to internalise the bark and branch patterns, we realised that we were getting to know the forest better. What were hitherto just tall columns to us began to have identities. This knowledge facilitated our relationship with trees. By this stage, we could identify around twenty species of trees.

Thinking back, I recall a particular incident took place then that became a tipping point. We had found a lone flower lying on the forest floor. It had a beautiful distinct pattern. Our local teachers provided us with its local name—*eralam*—but we did not find such a name in any of the reference books we had. We were keen to find the scientific name of the flower. All of us, teachers and students, sat together poring over all the information we could lay our hands on in the library. For a whole day and into the night, our search took different paths. Finally in the book *Flowers of Sahyadri* by Shrikant Inghalkar, we found an illustration of the flower and discovered that the tree it came from was *Lophopetalum Wightianum*. This hundred-foot-tall tree grew near streams, and its seeds were light enough to be dispersed by wind. This single-minded search convinced our students that our tree identification journey was a truly enjoyable pastime. We ended that first year by recording nearly forty trees. We collated all we knew on each of these species through drawings, photos, notes and references,

Another new ‘lens’: identifying leaf venation patterns

The following year began with us looking at leaves of saplings, which were at eye level. We began to pay attention to aspects of each leaf—something we had never done. The length of each leaf petiole, its appearance, and leaf margins were studied. So was the arrangement of leaves on branches to see whether it was opposite or alternate, simple or compound. We then looked at the underside of the leaf to study its venation patterns. Soon, totally new features that we had never noticed began to emerge—the presence (or sometimes the absence) of glands on the leaves or on the

petiole. This step of in our learning journey was the most challenging one so far, as there were so many similar patterns and so many fine differences in venation to look for.

One very interesting outcome of this exercise was the level playing field that it created. Students and teachers were all learning something new here and prior knowledge did not count for much. Some students made phenomenal advances, leaving the rest of the group including the teachers far behind. This gave those students a lot of confidence. Among the students too, it brought out interesting variations. Amongst our students, there were some who were intellectually able but struggled with observational learning—grasping concepts easily but finding it difficult to pick out specific features and identifying specimens. Another fascinating aspect of being in a forest is to have a sense of direction. Some seemed gifted with a natural sense of direction and orientation while others were totally lost. Still others began to gradually build this skill. Often our guides would stop and ask us to point out some known landmark. The responses were sometimes hilarious and completely wrong! Incidentally, the girls left most of the boys far behind while learning field botany.

Other learnings

The following year brought the best possible gift for us in our learning exercise—time with India's number one botanist, the young and brilliant Dr. Navendu Page. We had never met anyone like him before. He seemed to recognise almost every tree, shrub or plant or had the tools to help identify them. Most importantly, he was more than ready to share his knowledge with us and very patiently at that. Our forest walks then changed: Saji and Suresh first helped us to identify trees, as before, and provided us with their local names. We would then photograph those trees and send the images to Navendu. By the time we returned to our camp, he would have sent their scientific names to us! We now knew the local name and scientific names of local trees and could begin our field observations.

All this happened at a furious pace, and we were unable to process the information that fast. We needed to take repeated walks down the same routes and record all the new observations. This was what consolidated our learning. We began to club our observations into sections. If it was a trifoliate leaf, we knew it had to be either from a *Melicope lunu-ankenda* or a *Bischofia*. If the leaf had a light green petiole, it was either of a *Mastixia* or a *Persea*. If it was a compound leaf, it had to be one of ten species.

If compound leaves were oppositely arranged, then the specimen could only be from one of two species. This sort of clubbing helped us narrow down our choices.

Further, we also learnt that trees produce the most fascinating chemicals in the world, many of which we have still not identified. While some that we have identified have great medicinal properties, some can cause severe allergic reactions. Thus, plants from the *Anacardiaceae* family produce a chemical called urushiol, which causes blisters such as those we get around our mouth from eating mango. So, we knew mango trees belong to this family, as do cashew trees. In the Western Ghats, there are several other trees from this family, and some like two species of *Holigarna* and a *Nothopegia* can cause severe allergies. We learnt that it is important to not touch any part of an unidentified plant or tree casually, for this can have serious consequences. Of course, students or teachers who had an allergic response to a particular tree learnt to identify that tree very quickly!

At 130 species and counting, our tree identification journey is still running. We have covered most of the trees in GBS and many of the shrubs as well, and are now looking to learn about lianas. Our students and some of our teachers have together created a consolidated record of these, including details and many photographs, and some drawings and sketches too. The students with whom this journey began have now graduated, and the subsequent batches are on *their* learning journeys now. Most of us teachers have advanced in our learning, and our students therefore have many more resource persons whose different styles of teaching can help them approach this learning in different ways.

In this project, we have come across a small number of students who were not ready to take the plunge with tree identification and preferred to observe birds instead. Of course, they have been given this freedom to do so, but their projects brought alive the joy in learning to them as well. The energy generated during these three weeks of our field trip every year spills over to the rest of the year. There have been some heartbreaking discoveries too. Once during a forest walk, we came across giant pits that had been used during the period of the British empire to trap wild elephants. They were a chilling reminder of the past for us all. Also, we discovered that although some of the forest patches look untouched, much of the original forest was at one time chopped for the growing the Ironwood tree—*Mesua*

ferrea. It is no wonder that so many of those trees still grow here. We further found out that what looks like an innocent trail through the forest now, was once a regular route taken by armies that marched down it dragging their cannons. Today though, the forest has recovered its former grandeur, and those unpleasant memories are a part of history. This invited us to put those events behind us too.

Conclusion

Our present chapter of tree learning and our earlier chapters of pursuing birds, butterflies and other life forms have truly awakened our senses. When we are in Wayanad, we feel a heightened sense of being alive. Each minute of each day seems so vibrant. As we lie in our cozy beds in our forest camp, we can hear the call of the different species of owls—the fish owl, the wood owl and even the elusive Sri Lankan frogmouth. Most of us are awake early to hear the dawn chorus which is one of the sweetest sounds in any healthy forest. Amidst all this excitement, there is no talk of boredom, or of missing TV serials and sports. None of the students carries a phone. Life is so rich and we cannot wait to experience it to the fullest. We feel this energy is carried through the year, even if not to the same extent. We feel privileged and truly blessed for this great opportunity. As a teacher, I wish that all young people had such opportunities.



“

If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.

— Rachel Carson, in *A Sense of Wonder*

The Pause and the Proof: Reclaiming the Crucible of Learning

HARPREET HURA



I. The uncertainty principle in instruction

In the quiet of a high school physics classroom, a student hovered over the diagram of a projectile, pencil tip wavering just above the paper. In my old life as a quantum scientist, I would have described her as being in a state of cognitive superposition—considering three or four different paths to a solution and as yet uncertain about them all.

I stood at the whiteboard, my board pen feeling unusually heavy. I had the ‘answer’ right there in my pocket, the singular, collapsed state of the problem, but I knew that if I spoke too soon, I would become an intrusive observer. In quantum mechanics, the moment you measure a system, you change it forever. In the classroom, if I intervene too early, I force a premature collapse of a student’s thought process. The ‘wave function’ of her curiosity vanishes, and that rich, probabilistic space of *maybe* is replaced by a flat, singular *is*.

I have realized that the most powerful thing I have brought from the lab to the school is not my grasp of Schrodinger’s equation; it is an appreciation for the **pause**. It is that deliberate, often awkward silence where I choose not to ‘save’ the student. There is a palpable tension in that silence, I call it a ‘kinetic frustration’. If I hold it just right, it turns into discovery. If I break it, I rob her of the proof. Not the one written in ink, but the internal proof to which she can navigate in the dark on her own.

This is the conundrum of ‘The Pause and the Proof’: how to remain present enough to provide the ‘potential energy’ to facilitate learning, while remaining distant enough to ensure that I do not collapse the very intelligence I am trying to foster.

II. The architecture of immediacy

I often ask myself: Why are students in such a hurry?

I think of it as the ‘McDonaldification’ of the brain: an expectation that one just walks to a counter, hand over a few tokens or press a button, and a standardized product will appear. There is no mystery in this transaction. There is no growth in the waiting, just an exchange of a *want* for a *get*. A student raises a hand, presents a problem, and waits—not for a hint or a direction—but for the answer. To students, a teacher is like a human vending machine; if the answer does not appear the moment they press the button (raise their hand), they assume that the system is broken. In my corporate years, we optimized every workflow to eliminate a costly ‘pause’, but in a school, the pause is not a cost it is valuable capital.

Moreover, these students face ‘Corporate Short-Term Results’ pressure. Parents, understandably worried about an uncertain global economy, treat their children like small start-ups. They want a high Return on Investment (ROI) for every hour of study. If a child spends two hours struggling with a single physics concept without ‘getting the answer’, the parent sees a loss of control over the ROI. In engineering, a control loop minimizes error; in learning, a so-called ‘error’ is the very feedback required to re-calibrate the thought process.

When I was a student, if I wanted to understand the nuances of a Taylor Series or the trajectory of a projectile, I had to trek to the library in the Indian Institute of Technology, punch in a library card, and search for information in a physical book. This was the mandatory pause built into the physics of learning then. Today, it has been engineered out of existence; AI can solve a calculus derivative in milliseconds.

We want answers because answers create the illusion of being in control. If I know the formula for the refractive index, I feel I have mastered the relevant facts on light. Yet, standing in the lab later with a straw in a bowl of water, I get confused by the bend in its image. I feel I have lost control. Most students find this sort of vulnerability unbearable. They have been taught that questions are just hurdles to be cleared, rather than doors to be opened. We place the Answer on a pedestal and treat the Question as a mere inconvenience.

III. Defining the pause: the pedagogical scaffolding of silence

We know that without friction, there is no traction. A pause is that friction. It is the ‘Wait Time’ needed to move past the ‘False Peaks’—where they grasp at half-remembered formulae—and descend into the deeper silent depths of their own logic. It is a moment of high-frequency cognitive

activity masked by outward stillness, where the students are allowed to look at their own confusion without being judged by a ticking clock.

Scientifically, this is exactly like the difference between Supervised and Unsupervised Learning in Artificial Intelligence (AI). In Supervised Learning, we give the machine ‘labelled data’, like showing a picture of an apple and saying, ‘This is an apple.’ The machine learns to recognize the label. This is how most traditional schooling works. *Here is the problem, and here is a formula to find the answer.* This is efficient, but the machine—or in my case, a student—never truly understands the actual object; only that it has a tag. In Unsupervised Learning, the machine is given raw, unlabelled data and is told to find the patterns itself. It must then struggle to find ‘clusters’ of meaning, which is where its true intelligence resides. By jumping in with answers, we teachers are actually training students to be less able than algorithms, so much so that they may eventually be replaced by machines. Instead, we need to teach them to do what AI cannot: sit with the problem, the unlabelled mess of reality, until a pattern emerges. The ‘Pause’ is the time required for the brain to perform this unsupervised clustering—to see patterns in the universe (Physics) and grasp the logic in a system (Mathematics)—without the crutch of a textbook label. When I rush to fill the silence, I am implicitly telling my students, ‘I don’t think you can get there on your own’. When I sustain the pause, my implicit message is, ‘I know you are thinking, and I value that process more than the result’.

Of course, silence is no panacea. Just as radioactive isotopes have a half-life, a student’s curiosity too has a ‘decay rate’. If the pause is too long, the ‘kinetic frustration’ turns into ‘static despair’. The students stop being participants in a process and become spectators of their own failure.

The art of teaching seems to be about knowing when and how to break the silence. I find it very difficult to judge this perfectly. Outside the classroom, I seek wise counsel of the experienced teachers in our school. In class, I look for physical cues: a furrowed brow and a tapping pencil are signs of active processing—the wave function is still evolving. However, drooping shoulders, a closed notebook or a wandering gaze suggest that the process has lost its energy.

IV: Peek into the crucible

In my own classroom, I have started using a ‘Ten-Minute Rule’. If a student asks me why the tension in the string is at zero at the top of the

vertical circle, I do not provide an answer right away. I sometimes just look at them, or I may ask them to draw the free-body diagram again. At other times, I ask them what might happen if the string was a rod, or simply invisible (like in the circus act called ‘Globe of Death’).

Thereafter, the first two minutes are usually filled with irritation. The students sigh, shift in their seats and look at their peers for a lifeline. The fans whirr above us. We are in what I call the ‘Crucible Zone’—a hot, uncomfortable and frustrating pause. At this point, I provide a ‘quantum’ nudge—a tiny hint or leading question that shifts the student’s perspective just enough to restart the thinking process. I might ask, ‘What is the one thing we are assuming stays constant here...’ or even suggest going onto the playground and mimicking a circular motion. The goal is to keep the students in a zone where the challenge is just beyond reach, yet attainable if they stand on tiptoe.

At about the seven-minute mark, something miraculous usually happens. Irritation morphs into a quiet, intense focus. They start muttering to themselves. They start sketching in the margins of their notebook.

I remember that a student was once struggling with the concept of ‘Total Internal Reflection’. He wanted the formula for the critical angle. I refused to give it to him. Instead, I gave him a laser pointer and a glass block, and told him to find the ‘disappearing act’. When he finally saw the light flip back into the glass block, he gasped audibly. If I had given him the formula in the first minute, he would have known the ‘answer’, but he would never have ‘seen the light’!

V: Un-learning in the teacher: a reciprocal gift

This journey has changed me more than it has changed my students. After twenty years of problem-solving and delivering results in industry, my first instinct was to help students. In the corporate world, if a junior team member faced a roadblock at work, one helps to clear it as good managers do. But in the classroom, I had to un-learn the desire to be ‘the hero’. I realized that every time I provided an answer too quickly, I only pandered to my own ego, while starving my students’ intellectual abilities. A ‘pause’ requires a different kind of strength—one which helps me to manage their frustration and control my own. It means realizing that insight cannot be scheduled; it can only be invited. It means staying in the ‘unsupervised’ space alongside students, resisting the urge to label the ‘fruit’ for them.

Further, when I do not exactly teach only the method found in the textbook, students often surprise me with their own creative solutions—logical pathways I had not considered, or analogies that are more vivid than my own. These moments disconfirm my biases about what a good student should be, or how ‘hard’ problems should be solved.

Ultimately, the ‘pause’ is a humbling exercise for both parties. For the student, it fosters a respect for the question, and a realization that learning about the world is not like going to a ‘drive-through restaurant’ but rather a deep well that needs a long rope to reach ‘water’. For me, this analogy is the antidote to pedagogical fatigue.

VI. Conclusion: the resonance of discovery

Two years ago, Mr Murali at the Study Centre in Bengaluru gave me the book, *The Ending of Time*, consisting of dialogues between Jiddu Krishnamurti and David Bohm. They talk about ‘psychological time’—that restless gap between ‘what is?’ and ‘what should be?’. I see now that the quick answer is the ultimate agent of that psychological time—a flight from the discomfort of the present moment toward the safety of a conclusion. A pause collapses the gap. It allows us to be fully present with the ‘what is...’—the essence of a problem.

As I wrap up this first year in the classroom, I realize the Pause and the Proof are two sides of the same coin. The proof is the destination, but the pause is the journey. We are not just teaching physics and maths; we are teaching the patience to live in a world that does not always have a vending-machine solution for problems. We are teaching individuals to be comfortable with silence, because it is in that silence that the wave function of confusion finally collapses, and truth is found.



Befriending the Ancient: A Direct Approach to Engaging with History

ASHWIN PRABHU



‘Look...not with your mind but with your eyes’—Krishnamurti uses this pithy line towards the very end of a talk with Rishi Valley students, during the course of which he makes a rare concession with regard to ‘how to’ and guides them in a step-by-step observation exercise:

‘First of all, sit completely quiet, comfortably, sit very quietly, relax, I will show you. Now, look at the trees, at the hills, the shape of the hills, look at them, look at the quality of their colour, watch them. Do not listen to me. Watch and see those trees...

And then, he makes the statement that this article opens with: ‘Look... not with your mind but with your eyes’.

Earlier in the same dialogue, he spent a considerable length of time drawing a careful distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘intelligence’ for his young audience. He said knowledge was a composite of the ‘scientific’, the ‘collective’ and the ‘personal’; yet asserted that it does not represent true intelligence. ‘Intelligence is the quality of the mind that is very sensitive, very alert, very aware’, he said, and then asked, ‘Now, is this intelligence being gathered by you here in this school? Are you gathering it or only gathering knowledge through books?’.

As teachers in the Krishnamurti schools, we often fret about not being handed a convenient template of how to teach in the classroom. Yet, the history teacher in me cannot but sense a tantalizing sliver of possibility, a tiny hint of opportunity in the above exchange.

Cut to the classroom

To take poetic license from a poem, if that is even possible, and to bend a line from Edwin Brock’s *Five Ways to Kill a Man*, there are many

cumbersome ways to kill a child's interest in a subject. And I have learned that for a history teacher, the simplest, most direct and neatest way to do it is to start a fresh class with a 'when' or 'where' question. It takes but a few sessions for an attentive teacher to notice that children learn in many different ways, and that while some have a head for facts and years, and the names of kings and queens and thrive on this, a considerable number are rather discouraged when there is an undue emphasis on the informational aspects of a topic. The thing is that a fact-based question has only one 'right' answer and children wise up to this very quickly. The few who know that specific piece of information which the teacher wants from them are quick to raise their hands, while the rest of the class has precious little to contribute to the proceedings. The unhappy fall-out to introducing history like this—as a bundle of names and facts—is that it is soon seen as a subject that is not for everyone.

This then is the twin-thrust of this article—to consider what is a good engagement model for children in their formative years of learning history which will keep them 'hooked' to the subject instead of making them feel inadequate, and at the same time critically examine the educational philosophy underlying these teaching-learning practices.

History that is accessible easily to children in a tangible, visceral manner is the art, sculpture and architecture of the land—temples, mosques, churches, forts, and even its performing arts. So, a field visit to these places can offer an excellent entry-point into their study: *Look... not with your mind, but with your eyes*—that line again.

A reflective teacher's task here is to first help children identify what is 'material' and what is 'physical', and then to get them to touch it and feel it before beginning to study facts and information. As Krishnamurti's statement reminds us, the emphasis therefore is not on what the child already knows, but on what she can observe and describe first-hand; and then see which exploratory paths of learning she will be encouraged to try.

To get children to slow down and patiently observe what is in front of them without letting prior knowledge cloud their vision requires structuring the lesson a little. A simple opening question ('Describe the structure you are seeing in front of you'), an interactive worksheet ('Count the number of elephants you see in this mural'), or a small visual cue ('Did you notice the bend of the leg in that sculpture?') will all help draw a student's attention and focus. To be able to describe a picture well, he

will also need to observe carefully and this process of closely describing material and structure will doubtless throw up questions. Significantly these will be the child's own questions, not the teacher's, which will then become triggers to further enquiry and study. This approach also fits with findings in developmental psychology that advocate a gradual transition from concrete sensory-based learning in the early and middle years of school, to more conceptual and research-based learning in the later years.

Most importantly, knowing that the teacher is not looking for only one answer throws open the discussion to the class for wider participation. Every child feels confident in volunteering an observation or a description based on what she is seeing. When a group of students realize that although they are all looking at the same object, each sees something subtly different and thus describes it differently. This brings about the powerful realization that despite claims of being objective, history is fraught with subjective interpretation. Experiencing a multiplicity of personal responses first-hand enables young students to keep an open mind about the notion of 'truth' in history. Pedagogically speaking, in an approach like this, the learning possibilities are endless:

- Observation of physical structures and sites allows one to look for patterns and styles as well as helps in finding a connection between what one is seeing and what one knows or may have read about.
- Also, when material history is all we have, unsupported by other sources of information like literature, it is quite likely that there will be more than one interpretation even by scholars. This teaches one to be comfortable with ambiguity, and sometimes with 'not knowing' despite taking the trouble to follow up on questions by probing deeply.
- To know that in physical exploration, every visit offers the possibility of noticing something new or in a fresh way. In the process, the previous patterns one saw may also change. Stereotypes can be challenged, and surprising insights can be gleaned. For example, students may observe that not only are followers of other religions responsible for vandalism in religious sites, but also followers from the same religion. They might note that several awe-inspiring examples of strong independent women exist in Indian sculpture across the country.
- Finally, this encourages students to learn not only from what is present, but at times from what is missing. For instance, the fact that there are

no depictions of warfare in Indus Valley art will suggest something to a curious child.

What enables this model of learning is privileging contact over content, and the willingness of the teacher to be not just a facilitator but also a co-participant. Such exposure to the 'built heritage' or 'material heritage' can offer nuanced and timeless lessons, especially in the age we live in. It helps students to learn how to work without succumbing to the need for instant gratification, and to hone their individual observation skills without undue reliance on tools or technologies.

Children are now growing up in an age where very little is long-lived, what with disappearing messages and images, use-and-throw garments and appliances, and rapidly changing interests and opinions! In such times as these, it becomes especially important to recognize and appreciate the permanence that physical heritage offers, especially when it is rare to come by.

Above all, what is most relevant is what Krishnamurti says at the end of the same dialogue that was mentioned earlier:

You have finished looking at the things outside, and now with your eyes closed you can look at what is happening inside... And when you do this, do you know what happens to you? You become very sensitive, you become very alert to things outside and inside. Then you find out that the outside is the inside.

Isn't this after all what a history teacher could attempt to do with his students?



Understanding the World and Oneself through Language Learning

BHAVEEN SAWLANI



Language learning presents opportunities for understanding the world and oneself. Language is the medium through which we gain knowledge and which we use to understand and make sense of the world we live in. While there is much to gain by using language to read informative texts, it is also a window into our inner selves for it is through language that we can articulate our thoughts and opinions and come in contact with what we think and feel.

Broader philosophical questions around language and articulation

Does thought exist before articulation, or is it through articulation that one realizes one's thoughts? Eli Alshanetsky in the article 'Thoughts into words' talks of 'the paradox of articulation: are you excavating existing ideas, or do your thoughts come into being as you think?'¹ For many it may be that their thoughts form as they think about something and attempt to articulate it: we better understand what we feel or think by sharing our ideas with others or by putting them down on paper. Their contours and shapes become clearer—and we become explorers setting sail on the vast ocean of consciousness.

Another question is whether thought exists independently of its articulation? If thought is a process in language, then this further highlights the importance of language in understanding oneself and how one conceives of oneself. The example of certain Canadian Inuit tribes is worth mentioning here. Languages like Nunavik or Inuktitut have multiple terms for ice that describe its specific characteristics. While the type of words and their range may be a matter of debate, it is agreed that these languages have 'a far superior ability to distinguish between different types of ice than other languages'.² This shows that language also shapes and empowers us

to think about the world we live in. In a different context, we can also go back to the French mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes, and his famous quote ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (‘I think therefore I am’). Thinking can therefore be said to be central to this process of learning about oneself.

The role of language in education

We would all agree, with Krishnamurti, that the purpose of education is to help the learner to learn about not just the outer world which one inhabits but also the inner world of one’s feelings and thoughts. Language learning appears to be crucial to this process. In the classroom it can be noticed that confidence in articulation also leads to better self-esteem and this confidence carries forward into other areas. The opposite can also be observed—a lack of command over the language leads to self-doubt and withdrawal from situations in which the student is encouraged to participate. Learners who are able to speak their mind clearly feel a certain sense of empowerment and engage with things around them with enthusiasm.

This line of thinking of course has its limitations; it is not a matter of simple correlation in which clearer articulation means higher awareness of oneself. Highly articulate people are not necessarily more self-aware. But I think language learning and articulation do play an important role in allowing learners to become active and engaged participants in the process of education and also explore the inner world. There is a line in a song called *Don’t Go Away* by a popular British rock band Oasis that laments, ‘...Damn my education, I can’t find the words to say, with all the things caught in my mind...’.

One of the challenges of language learning is that we often struggle to find the right words to say what we want to say, and to learn to say what we say responsibly. As Eli Alshantesky mentions in another place in the aforementioned article, ‘We need to chisel away at imprecise formulations, while guarding against words that blur what we think’. This I think is what language teachers should encourage learners to do in their classrooms. They need to find the language and the words that will effectively communicate their thoughts and opinions for a particular purpose, much like a sculptor who works on his material.

Another dimension to language

Krishnamurti often points to the fact that ‘the word is not the thing’. We must also learn to observe without the word or the need to label oneself and one’s emotions. This may sound paradoxical: on the one hand we are

trying to encourage articulation to help learners get in touch with what they think and feel; and on the other hand, we are pointing to observation without hurrying to label or name i.e. to go beyond the word. When we look at something and say 'It is a beautiful sunset' does that limit us? Do we stop looking when we name? Another powerful statement which summarises this significance of direct observation in learning about oneself is made by Tom Yonashiro in his article 'The Power of Articulation'³—The paradox of language, then, is that it is both necessary and insufficient. It is the tool we use to navigate and make sense of the world, but it is also the barrier that separates us from direct, unmediated experience of reality'. This then also becomes an important part of our exploration.

Voicing one's thoughts: encouraging articulation and participation

Despite its limitations, as teachers we would agree that encouraging learners to articulate and share their thoughts is an important part of their education. Language is important for us to communicate; for us to be able to think and be able to share. It allows us to discover who we are. Even as it allows us to consider a situation and take a position, it enables us to become more aware of our position. We may all have experienced that nagging feeling when we wanted to say something but could not; or a time when we felt strongly about something but could not describe or say more about it until we wrote it down or thought further about how to say it. A good education should indeed enable us to overcome the despair of the songwriter who could not 'find the words to say...all the things caught in the mind'. Clearly, learning a language well opens windows into learning about the world and oneself, and educators need to be concerned about doing justice to this essential aspect of education.

Endnotes

1. Eli Alshanetsky - Thoughts into words <https://aeon.co/essays/what-comes-first-ideas-or-words-the-paradox-of-articulation>
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Exploring Culturally Diverse Picture Books for the Young

My Personal Journey as a Teacher

KEERTHI L MUKUNDA



I was reading the picture book, *A Day's Work*,¹ by Eve Bunting, which tells the story of an immigrant boy from Mexico and his grandfather who live in the USA. When the narrative begins, they are waiting by the side of the road to find some work. As the story unfolds, the child who can speak English helps his grandfather communicate with would be employers. They eventually manage to get work by lying about their skills. After initial difficulties with their employers, the two succeed in doing the work. The story illustrates the bond that grows between these two family members as they navigate difficult situations.

I was touched by this story and told myself I had learned something about a community I did not know much about. Later though, I discovered that reviewers had criticized this book for its stereotypical representation of the Mexican experience in the USA: poverty, deception, hard work, shame, and so on. I contrasted this book with another titled *A Gift from Papa Diego*² by Benjamin Alire Saenz—a bilingual book in Spanish and English. This is also about a Mexican-American boy and his relationship with his grandfather. This narrative traces the boy's wish to fly to Mexico in a Superman suit on his birthday to meet his grandfather. This boy's family is better off and owns a home with a backyard and represents the community quite differently. Both books are valuable as windows into that world.

As a teacher, I like to understand how stories that represent real human experience, rather than emphasize stereotypes or differences, can help children build bridges to other cultures. When I look back on what drew me to the world of books of varying types and genres, I can see that

I had a fascination for culturally diverse literature—and I am still drawn to it. Something that has captured my attention in the last few decades is to understand and seek out literature that mirrors different sections of our human society, opening up new vistas for readers in subtle and not just ‘politically correct’ ways. I look for genuine stories that reveal real lives and feelings. Allen Say, a Japanese-American artist and writer, has written on themes like homesickness, the yearning for another place and a sense of belonging, and cross-cultural realities for some ethnic Japanese families in America. These tales are autobiographical in nature. The author includes details about both the cultures in his life—Japanese and Californian—in the margins of the text and within his illustrations. Perhaps the fact that he highlights universal human elements, such as the need for a sense of belonging, helps him connect with the reader so well.

Illustrated books that I read in my childhood were often Russian folk tales. The Famous Five and Secret Seven series by Enid Blyton caught my fancy too, as did the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series of novels. Much later, I listened to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk of 2009 on ‘The Danger of a Single Story.’ Her ideas made me realize that most of the books I had read as a child were set in faraway unfamiliar places. Adichie is a Nigerian writer who had similarly read books that mostly featured foreign children going on adventures and tried to visualize their backyards and hideouts. As she commented so beautifully and poignantly in her talk, those worlds were neither local nor familiar. I had assumed that good stories had to be set in faraway lands and feature characters who were distant from one’s own experience. Why I had assumed this and idolized those worlds was an important question. As an adult, I wondered whether it is important for readers to be able to place themselves within narratives and see their own lives mirrored in literature. Adichie highlights this in her talk with these words:

Because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature.

Tultul Biswas, a key member of the leadership team in Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, also emphasizes this. While encouraging children to read, she writes, ‘we want every child to feel that the book she is reading is hers, it speaks to her, it illustrates her life, her dreams, her challenges,

likes and dislikes, and moreover, it also listens to her. We want every child to experience a sense of belonging in the world of books.³ These ideas too now shape my understanding, and influence what I read to children or talk about in class, and in turn encourage students to read.

A few years ago, I went on a school excursion to Bhopal and visited the Eklavya Publishing House. There, on the shelves of their bookshop, the students and I found a range of stories that revealed to me the importance of depicting a diversity of cultures, communities and classes in children's stories. This has also been shared in the most beautiful ways by the authors who, importantly, are themselves from the communities they write about.

Adichie for one has pointed out that reading books about only one type of cultural experience can result in readers seeing other people in a unidimensional way in real life. The Mexican stories mentioned earlier come to mind here. Hence, it is valuable to have more than just one representation of a culture or community, for this provides a rich ground for conversations in the classroom. It struck me that urban readers in India would get a more nuanced view of a child's life in rural India if they read a book with photographs and not just pictures. Somewhere in the background they would notice the typical settings and livelihoods, and see vignettes from their own lives, their own families. They would absorb these too, even if the more important narrative is in the foreground.

*The Why-Why Girl*⁴ by Mahasweta Devi is a good example of this. It is a story about a little girl from the Sabar tribal community who goes about her daily routine. While we learn about her culture from the background of the text, Moyna's childlike qualities and curiosity are foregrounded in the story. What stands out and appeals to the reader is her urge to ask questions of those around her. Another such rich story is *Pongal*⁵ by Bama, a Tamil Dalit writer, which explores the experience of discrimination through the eyes of a child who wonders why his employers will not taste the pongal (a rice dish) made by his parents.

Stories in Different Tales published by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies directly address the issues caused by conflict between families and discrimination, and show how children navigate these spaces in different ways. Two examples from this series are 'Friends in School'⁶ by Joopaka Subhadra and 'The Two-Named Boy'⁷ by P. Y. Balan. Characters in these stories who are shown as loving parents are also guilty of misjudging, discriminating against and spurning other people. As we read, we also find

out how the children—the central characters—cope with it all in their own way. Endings are often not ‘happy’ ones in which all the threads are neatly tied. There are endings with the possibility that conflict still lurks ahead but offering some sort of resolution for the moment; others ending in death but with a sense of grace; some ending with the realization that there will always be disagreements but that small friendships will remain.

What stands out in these stories is their honesty. They are not just producing a politically correct version of life, not just introducing a character from a marginalized community in the name of representation. They are examples of literature representing diverse experiences and sensitively addressing complex issues. Being true to someone’s life experience or a community while writing about them is a tricky and subtle exercise. As publishers, authors, illustrators, and educators, we want to open new worlds for children, nurture their compassion and empathy, trigger their curiosity, while also doing justice to what is being represented. However, we must continue to remember that every story offers only one slice of a truth and is but one representation of every voice in it.

As teachers, we want children to read books which help them make connections and build bridges. Evaluating books for sharing with children is a task that fascinates me as I continue to discover diverse new literature, select new titles for the school library, and teach my students English Language and Social Science.

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**Turning Points:
A Tapestry of Reflections from Teachers**

**EXCERPTS FROM A SESSION AT
THE KFI TEACHERS' CONFERENCE 2025
HELD AT THE VALLEY SCHOOL, BANGALORE**

From the editors: A brief note about the session

Krishnamurti schools are envisioned as places where ‘both the teacher and the taught explore not only the outer world, the world of knowledge, but also their own thinking and their behaviour’. This session at the conference evoked moments of both introspection and interconnection. Seven teachers from diverse backgrounds were asked to reflect on the following question and share their responses:

Tell us about a teacher who made a difference in your life. How does that formative experience influence your own practice as a teacher?

We share in the following pages a brief profile of each of the teachers and what they shared with us.

To Be or Not to Be

SEEMA BANU



Seema joined The Valley School in 2023 and teaches a mixed-age group in junior school. Her association with The Valley School began through an outreach programme, and thus she is still passionate about such programmes. Her love for craft has inspired many young people as well as adults.

When I think back to my school years, one teacher stands out with extraordinary clarity—my class teacher, Ms. Baby Saju Joseph. She was not someone who was loud or commanded attention with authority. Her presence was quiet but steady, and she made you feel safe by simply being there.

I still remember the day when I was struggling with an assignment that everyone else seemed to find easy. My paper remained blank for longer than it should have, and I felt a familiar knot of fear tightening in my chest—the fear of being noticed, of being called out, of being made to feel small. Ms. Joseph walked over to me, and instead of pointing out my slowness or urging me to hurry, she simply rested her hand lightly on my desk and said, ‘It’s alright. Take your time. I’ll wait’. She did not move on quickly or hover impatiently; she truly waited. In that silence, something shifted. I felt seen, not judged. I felt trusted, not measured against anyone else. And in that quiet space she created, I found the courage to begin. That moment never left me. It taught me that learning is not about racing forward but about finding your own rhythm.

There were other voices too that left their mark in a very different way. I remember confiding in a teacher that I wanted to become a teacher. I was met with sharp dismissal. I was told that only those who had no capacity to be anything else chose teaching. At that age, the words stung deeply, planting seeds of doubt and shame about a dream that felt so natural to me. Over time, I realized that this moment was as impactful as the one

with Ms. Joseph—though in quite the opposite way. Instead of presence and patience, this teacher showed me how words can wound and diminish a child's sense of possibility. Both experiences stayed with me. One taught me what to become; the other, what never to be.

Now, when I sit with the children in my own class, I carry both memories. I remember how it felt to be given space and trust, and I try to pass that forward. And I also remember how it felt to have my dream dismissed, and I make a quiet promise to myself never to do that to a child. Every word, every look, every silence holds weight. Teachers shape more than minds; they shape self-belief.

In many ways, I am who I am today because of both kinds of teachers—the one who believed in me, and the one who did not. Between them, they showed me the full measure of a teacher's power, and I chose which part of that experience to carry forward.



Safe Spaces Where Students Can Be Seen and Heard

LOPAMUDRA KAR



Lopamudra studied at Santiniketan and has been with the KFI schools for the past thirty years. She taught for seventeen years at the Rajghat Besant School before moving to The Valley School thirteen years ago. She has taught different subjects across age groups and is passionate about teaching mathematics through hands-on activities. She set up the Math Lab for middle school students. Her love for music and craft too shines through the several activities she facilitates across age groups.

I studied at Patha Bhavan in Santiniketan, a residential school founded by Rabindranath Tagore. For him the purpose of education was to nurture a student's physical, emotional and intellectual growth in natural surroundings. The development of the senses and appreciation of literature, music, dance, and the fine arts were as important as intellectual growth. Many teachers made a great impact on me, and I will share a few stories.

My first story is about a language teacher who left her job at a university to join Patha Bhavan. In her 'supervised study' sessions, our senior students would often request her to explain the meaning of a poem. A few of us would seat ourselves just behind those students to listen intently to their discussions. She brought the text alive by helping them view the poem through many lenses, thus allowing them to develop multiple perspectives. What we heard made us eager to explore and appreciate the beauty of these poems ourselves.

Every year, students in Class 10 performed a dance-drama and the rehearsals went on for a month. We, the students in the lower grades, would watch their practice after our lessons were done. At the end of a month, we too knew the songs and dances. We could have performed the dance drama ourselves, even though we did not get the chance to be on

stage at that time. Learning can thus happen beyond the closed walls of a classroom. As facilitators, we really do not know how and when students learn. I feel that it is our responsibility to provide learners with the right ambience to learn and create.

My third story is about a teacher who taught me mathematics. When we were in the final year of secondary school, he asked us where we would be pursuing our higher education. My parents had decided to withdraw me from Santiniketan and admit me to a conventional high school near our home. My teacher felt that Santiniketan was the right place for me. During the summer break, he visited our home and had a long discussion with my father, expressing his apprehensions. He convinced my father to let me return to Santiniketan and even assured him that he would be my local guardian there. I am so grateful that I had teachers like him who stood by me, understood what I needed, and supported me in immeasurable ways.

When faced with similar circumstances where I teach now, I often wonder how to convince parents that our school environment can nurture their child in so many ways. Here students learn how to share a common space in the hostel, be sensitive to others' needs, become self-motivated and more aware of nature and, most of all, begin to appreciate the sense of freedom and handle it responsibly. Yet, as teachers we can only make suggestions; the final decision lies with the child and parent.

The last story is about my house parent from Class 4 onwards. I depended on her support all the way till I finished college! Through the ups and downs in my life, her door was always open for me. She never asked me why I was upset or what was bothering me, and yet her calm presence and gentle care immediately made me feel better. We often spent time doing craft together — crochet, knitting, weaving or macrame. Practising those crafts is still an integral part of my life.

I feel it is important for teachers to provide a safe space for students so that they know that they are cared for and have people who will listen and make them feel seen. I stayed in touch with these teachers even after I left school and I still think of them as family. Their unconditional love and care gave me enormous strength to meet the challenges of life. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to them all!



Seeing It and Staying with It

BHASKAR ASPARI



Bhaskar has been associated with the Krishnamurti schools for three years now. He began his journey as an educator with Shibumi and is now a member of the staff in The Valley School. He has taught mathematics to middle and senior school classes, though he currently teaches Global Perspectives and Kannada. Bhaskar is also a musician and teaches students to play the guitar.

I had just begun teaching in Shibumi, a small space for learning in Bangalore inspired by Jiddu Krishnamurti. At that time they were looking for a mathematics educator. With no background in teaching, except for the occasional guitar lessons I gave, and with my work experience being mostly in the corporate and start-up world, I was not sure what it meant to teach mathematics to children. That was when I met my two mentors in Shibumi, Ganga and Vishwanath.

Working with them was more like a collaboration through which we built a relationship. What was clear was a common interest in finding out what it meant to go into the questions that Krishnamurti had raised about daily living— and how this was related to education.

After going through the curriculum and spending time with Vish and Ganga, I remember candidly saying during a staff meeting that I might not be able to teach mathematics. What struck me, which was rather unexpected, was not only their response but also the conviction or clarity with which they put it across. It felt more than mere encouragement. They simply said ‘You can do Math and you are good with children’. Of course, there was the data: I had studied math for a long time and was an engineering graduate after all. It was a pivotal moment for me as it communicated something very important about what it means to be a mentor and how crucial that role could be for someone who is trying to

discover something new in a completely unfamiliar environment—to see possibility in a person first.

The second aspect that influenced me was watching Vish and Ganga work with the children during class. I especially worked alongside Ganga, and it was a delight to see her slowly explore a math question or a problem with students in order to facilitate its comprehension first. Just like we might curiously examine an object from all sides, she had this capacity to walk the children through a problem by asking questions and encouraging them to describe it as well as they could and in all possible ways while simultaneously writing their descriptions on the board. It had a very specific impact which helped children, even if momentarily, actually forget their own beliefs about being bad at or fearful of math. This helped me set a sense of what it might mean to ‘stay with’ a problem for as long as necessary. The ‘staying with’ was a period of high mental activity and a deeply immersive state to be in, unpacking what is in front of you, one step at a time.



Inspiration and Innovation through Collaboration

PADMAPRIYA SHIRALI



Padmapriya has been associated with the Krishnamurti schools for forty years now, teaching in Rishi Valley School, Sahyadri School and The Valley School. During this time, she has taught several subjects across age groups. She is currently engaged in writing a mathematics textbook for NCERT and creating a course on math pedagogy. She is also the editor of a mathematics magazine published by Azim Premji University.

Throughout my schooling and my forty-year career in school-level teaching, I have drawn inspiration from a wide range of individuals—the teachers from my early years in school, as well as professional colleagues, visiting educators, and educational writers. Identifying any one individual as a primary source of inspiration has thus proved challenging! Consequently, I chose to reflect on two individuals who have recently influenced my professional thinking. These are young educators affiliated with a premier science institute in the country.

My association with them developed over the past few years during collaborative work on the development of a children's textbook. Although I have, over the years, experimented with numerous methodologies and pedagogical approaches to enhance the teaching and learning of mathematics, my interactions with these colleagues introduced fresh insights into innovative and engaging ways of approaching the subject.

Several aspects of their professional practice were particularly inspiring. Foremost among these were their deep passion for the discipline and the genuine intellectual pleasure they experienced in exploring mathematical ideas—an enthusiasm that naturally inspired others. Equally impressive was their commitment to sharing this joy with students and

their conscious effort to make mathematics an enjoyable and meaningful learning experience.

Their motivation to communicate effectively with learners required a firm grounding in pedagogical principles and an acute awareness of children's cognitive and emotional development. Such engagement demanded empathetic understanding and the capacity to view both the world and the subject matter from the perspective of a middle-school learner.

This experience has broadened my understanding of how mathematics can be approached to stimulate curiosity and self-directed exploration among students. At present, as I continue to interact with various teacher communities, I make it a point to share these new insights and perspectives to enrich collective teaching practice.



Learning as a Way of Being

ANANDA



Ananda has had a long association with the Krishnamurti schools—first as a student at the Nachiket School, and in Rajghat Besant School, and then as a teacher at the Rajghat Besant School and later at The Valley School for the past decade. He teaches in the junior and middle schools. Ananda is a musician too and plays many instruments. In his words, his journey as a student made returning to education a choiceless flow—he came back to join the Krishnamurti schools to learn more, and teaching simply happened.

Lifelong learner

The teacher who made the deepest difference in my life—and the one who left me with no choice but to become an educator myself — was an integral part of my growing years. From the age of seven to seventeen, I lived and learned with her. In those ten years, my life was transformed; I moved from the rugged, treeless mountains of Ladakh to a green haven by the seaside city of Madras. Living and learning flowed seamlessly into one another. Looking back now, I realize that her passion for education, play and life itself was so intense that I absorbed it without even knowing it. As an adult, I find myself drawn to the same way of living—learning as a way of being. Today, as I write and reflect, there are certain qualities in her that shine through—precious traits of a teacher who taught simply by being who she was.

Keeping the child alive

The child in my teacher was always alive and tenderly nurtured. She was playful, curious and open to wonder, and that quality is what I think made her such a powerful educator. She approached each day with freshness, eager to explore and try new things. That spirit of curiosity was contagious.

A passionate learner

She was constantly learning. Her enthusiasm to learn and share was endless and because she was learning all the time, she was always teaching. She was not just a subject teacher: she was our music teacher, dance teacher, theatre teacher, art and craft teacher, land work teacher, and even our baking teacher! She taught us everything from mask-making and needlework to origami and glass painting. None of this came from formal training. It came from a fearless joy of learning. And that, more than anything, shaped my own understanding of what it means to teach.

Learning as a living process

Her classroom was never bound by four walls. Learning happened everywhere—in the garden, under a tree, by the sea. She was deeply aware of life's movements: the natural world around us, the changing interests of children, the festivals and rhythms of the villages nearby, and even the events unfolding in the world beyond.

A timetable existed, but it was flexible. There was space for spontaneity, for learning that arose naturally, out of curiosity or a moment of discovery.

The mouth organ story

I remember one such moment vividly. I was fascinated while listening to a song whose tune was played on the mouth organ. My teacher happened to have one lying around, and when I asked if I could try learning it, she said, 'Of course, go ahead!'

It was close to the school holidays, and she encouraged me to keep it with me. My goal was to learn just that tune, but with all the time and leisure that I had in the holidays and the mouth organ always by my side, I began to experiment. By the end of the break, I had learnt not just one tune, but several! For years I thought I was self-taught. But later I realized I was not. The space, trust and opportunity that allowed me to teach myself, that came from a teacher.

Carrying it forward

Now, as a teacher myself, I see how much of her has found its way into my own practice. I find myself unafraid to bring new things into the classroom, alert to the world of my students, and alive to those magic moments when learning happens unexpectedly. The child in her helped the child in me stay alive and that, I believe, is the most beautiful gift a teacher can give.

Learning to Be a Gardener!

RICHA GOBBURU



Richa's journey with The Valley School began seventeen years ago. During those years, she has primarily interacted with senior school students and taught them English. Her love for the little ones drew her to the junior school as well, where she briefly taught Hindi. A linguist by training, Richa speaks, reads and expresses herself fluently not only in prose but also through poetry written in many languages.

Of the many transformative learning experiences in my life, I will share two. The first was with my father; the second, with my research supervisor.

In the wake of a rude financial setback, my parents were forced to relocate from Delhi to Banaras in 1978. Two things happened as a consequence: my father began attending Krishnamurti's talks at the Rajghat Study Centre, and my brother and I started school. On my first day of school at Sunbeam School, I remember wearing a sunshine yellow and olive-green striped tunic with a white shirt. Since I could already read and write in two languages, Hindi and English, my mother and the school decided that I should be enrolled in Class 1 at the immature age of four. This hasty decision had an enduring impact on my schooling.

Throughout my days in junior school, I felt invisible amidst a sea of faces and the pressure of academic work. Time passed in a haze. The only thing that I remember is that I was not 'seen' by anyone—peers and teachers alike. However, one transformative moment that I distinctly remember was with my father. One of the favourite topics of conversation in class used to be, 'What do you want to become when you grow up?' While other students were busy imagining bright futures as astronauts and doctors,

I was unable to wrap my head around this question. One day, when I broached the subject with my father and asked him, ‘What do you think I should be when I grow up?’, he answered simply, ‘You cannot ‘become’ anything; you are something already. Identify who you are and don’t come in the way of that’. This was utterly unfathomable and perplexing to me, but despite my naivete, it seemed to me to be of immense value.

Fast forward to 1999, when I was studying at EFLU, Hyderabad (known as CIEFL then), pursuing a Diploma in the Teaching of English and subsequently an MPhil. My supervisor, Professor A., had a reputation for being tyrannical. Expectedly, my two years of coursework and dissertation under her supervision proved extremely challenging, albeit the most rewarding. I learnt the value of candid, critical feedback from Prof A. Even though most weekends went into bracing myself for our Monday morning feedback sessions when my essays or newly written chapters would be unforgivingly criticized, I learnt how to see my own writing without sentimentality

I still draw on what I learnt from both individuals in my teaching practice. I encourage students to engage with their inner selves just as my father did. I also share my views with candour and authenticity to prompt my students to question, reflect on and bring about change in their work, just as Prof A. did. After 17 years in education, I am still learning to be a gardener; nurturing my ‘plants’ and weeding out weaknesses; often telling myself

*Dheere dheere re mana dheere sab kuchh hoye,
Maali seenchen sau garha, ritu aaye phal hoye*

(O my Mind, be patient, everything takes time,
A hundred pots the gardener waters, but a tree fruits only
when it is the season.)



Learning from the Large Canvas of Life

NALINI JAYARAM



Nalini's journey with The Valley School started in 1982 when she used to visit the campus as a young person and, in her words, the fragrance of the wilderness, the silence and the ambience of the school gripped her. She started teaching at The Valley School in 1988; but moved away from Bangalore to Uttarkashi shortly thereafter. Later, from 1991, she worked at Rajghat Besant School and then returned to work at The Valley School after 1994. During this time, she has interacted with children and adults across age groups and has been instrumental in holding art camps and bringing artisans to these spaces. She also teaches art at Goonj, an NGO.

In the large canvas of life many teachers have helped me, nurturing me at various stages, and each of them is so special to me in different ways. I would like to share a few evergreen memories of them.

Amma, my mother, had only a secondary school education but was a wonderful veena teacher. She had immense patience with her students, gently and joyously teaching them veena or vocal music, at their own pace, relating like a friend with each one. Practice sessions with her students after school or college would go on till dusk, filling our home with the 'naad' of the veena. With music and living being woven together, by default we absorbed music by listening. Listening was a key to learning.

My schooling, with its emphasis on academic excellence, competitions and constant comparisons, did not interest me. Participating in everything without being judged or competing was what I enjoyed. Showing curiosity or asking questions was frowned upon in class. Added to this were the woes of studying history and geography in Hindi. Without really understanding

much, I mastered the art of passing examinations. A part of childhood was left untouched, alive....to hold the wonder of the universe!

Yet, the presence of a vibrant music teacher at school brought me tremendous joy. She found the time to introduce a few of us to various types of vocal music: Kabir and Meera *bhajans*, Tagore's compositions, some patriotic hymns, and songs from many faiths. Besides, we also played in an orchestra, learnt new instruments, and so on. Each month in the assembly, she taught a new regional song of India for an entire school of perhaps 1000 children. Apart from the cultural events that were held in school, she took us to All India Radio, Doordarshan, foreign embassies, temples, and elsewhere—every opportunity to sing and perform in public. Listening and practicing music with this affectionate teacher is what made my school days tolerable. She opened the doors of my imagination, even though it was mainly through competitions.

These two teachers, and these experiences of learning outside the boundaries of classrooms, had a great impact on me as a growing child because I loved doing things on my own. Soon my urge to understand, learn and absorb things from the world of nature for its own sake, and not to earn grades, found a great doorway opening when I first stepped into The Valley School. On my first visit there, the fragrance of wild grass filled my senses. Listening to Krishnamurti opened the floodgates to life, nature and education. Here, living and learning together was a large part of education.

My sister and brother-in-law were already working at The Valley School. Walking through the wide valley surrounding the school, listening to the happy chatter and laughter of teachers and students discussing work, art and music made me feel sure that this was truly a place I wished to engage with. My husband and I were in our twenties when we joined the Krishnamurti schools. It felt like beginning school all over again. We plunged simultaneously into teaching and learning, and this made each day vibrant and lively. In the different K schools that we were part of, with many trials and errors, one could learn effortlessly, with different age groups, facing various challenges. Relating to friends working with passion in their own areas, working together with them, I learnt tremendously.

Finally, all this learning culminated in Nature. I am truly grateful for all the nurturing that happened in these schools. These schools are like sanctuaries for children, trees, animals, insects and birds alike. Each school is a living encyclopedia with its surrounding open spaces and life forms... each calling and inviting me to learn. At this point in life, when I am volunteering in the school, Nature is my teacher. Wandering for hours in nature; watching and listening; sketching and painting; sharing these learnings with children and adults; I have all the time to pause, to wonder and watch a snail go by...



Building Intrinsic Motivation in College Students

PROTEEP MALLIK



Editors' note: This article by a university faculty was written in response to a concern expressed by a reader, who wondered whether meaningful learning could take place in young people from diverse backgrounds in India, where there exist wide socio-economic inequities. Rather than be motivated by a desire to escape poverty as seen in underprivileged communities, or long for material success and yet have a sense of 'guilt' as seen in privileged students—both self-destructive emotions in different ways—can another kind of motivation be nurtured in students?

The students sat quietly in the classroom, looking apprehensive yet excited. Their fresh faces eager to learn what lay ahead of them in the next four years at university. I could feel the weight of their expectations of me as I stood before them. It was the first day of what would be a month-long summer programme for a fresh batch of undergraduate students.

They had been invited to the campus for very specific reasons — some for improving their English language or for strengthening numeracy skills, and all of them for learning to navigate the complexities of academic and social life in college. All were from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. At the Azim Premji University, we hold this summer programme as a bridge for

students between their cloistered school life and the independent college life ahead. It is often a critical first step toward creating social justice and equity for these youngsters. My role, and that of all my colleagues, is to equip the students with relevant capacities and awaken their minds to the range of possibilities that emerge as a result. Over the days that follow, students gradually begin to take ownership of their progress, and I feel that weight of expectation lifting off my shoulders—maybe not wholly, but quite substantially.

Every year at the end of such summer programmes, the other students in the batch join those assembled on campus. These students are usually from privileged backgrounds. Together, they

then attend a weeklong orientation before classes begin. As the campus bustles with their collective excitement, I am confronted with a fundamental question: what motivates all these students to take ownership over their learning and make the most of their time in college? Most Indian schools use the examination system to motivate students to work hard. This extrinsic form of motivation is short-lived and requires constant stoking. Surely, it is necessary for students to cultivate inner motivation and become autonomous learners? An innate curiosity about the world and the desire to contribute meaningfully to society can be strong intrinsic sources of motivation. Isn't the nature of motivation an important determinant of the kind of society we create? How can a teacher help to motivate students in the right way towards creating a just and equitable society? The teacher would need to possess a similar kind of motivation too.

Early in their college life, students begin to develop a sense of self. This has been beautifully described in a previous issue of this journal by Arjun Jayadev¹, my schoolmate and now colleague. Furthermore, the sources of motivation with which students come to college vary from one student to another. Both a teacher and the curriculum play an essential role in shaping student motivation and outcomes. I would like to explore four factors that help students from a range of social backgrounds

develop inner motivation: self-belief, prior knowledge, a sense of belonging, and shared goals.

For students, just believing they can tackle academic challenges goes a long way in motivating them. This requires their educational environment to provide them with layers of support, much like the scaffolding around a building that is under construction. This is required for students to feel that they can achieve their potential. The curriculum must be so designed as to be accessible to all, especially those with disadvantages who may be coping with the twin challenges of urban life and classroom transactions in English for the first time. One of the ways in which we at Azim Premji University accomplish this is by creating a level playing field. This is where practical work, such as laboratory, fieldwork and computer programming, comes to the rescue. This is due in large part to the fact that these learning opportunities are neglected in schools of all kinds. Working with one's hands in a lab or being able to connect with people and the environment during fieldwork are equally novel for the first-generation student and the urban elite, sometimes more so for the latter. We have seen that our courses in the first year of college, which emphasize these two skills, often help disadvantaged students build self-belief and assurance. Meanwhile, those accustomed to privileges in life realize that discomfort is a natural part of learning something new.

College learning also needs to connect with a student's prior knowledge, for it can be used to scaffold new learning. Students from rural areas may have had the experience of working on family-owned farms or of helping to run a small business, like an electrical store. I have noticed that such students thrive, for example, during laboratory work in the 'Electricity and Magnetism' course. The typical school curriculum, usually relying on teaching the syllabus verbatim from textbooks, divorces the ideas being taught from the lived realities and experiences in students' lives. The diversity of experiences students bring to the classroom, when it is drawn upon while teaching, enhances learning for everyone in the group. Sharing these experiences through group work and discussions brings students closer to one another by creating empathy and a common understanding. This can lead to the development of a shared purpose and motivation.

When students see that their experiences are valued, they begin to feel a sense of belonging on campus. Contextualising classroom learning in the new surroundings makes students feel like they are a part of the same community, not unlike the one they left to come to college. Fieldwork within the campus and its neighbourhood is an essential ingredient in our curriculum and allows students to immerse themselves in their surroundings. Even for urban and comparatively well-

prepared students, adjusting to learning is not smooth and easy. With the emphasis on laboratory work, building things with one's own hands, and doing fieldwork in peri-urban and rural areas, where they often face harsh realities, many of them feel challenged too. Building connections between the classroom and the broader surroundings helps to anchor these students, transforming the college into their home.

By working together, students gradually begin to focus on a more lasting set of goals. This is not to discount the fact that many privileged students are initially motivated by their family's and society's expectations of them and try to live up to these. However, as they begin to realize that their advantages only help them to a certain extent in college, they begin to look for a more fundamental purpose in life and develop more lasting sources of motivation. For underprivileged students, it is almost a socio-economic imperative that they get a college education. However, with appropriate support and guidance, these students too develop the confidence to think and act in ways that are not purely instrumental; many are motivated to perform better so that they can go back to their communities and help them with issues they see as important and which require thoughtful solutions. They begin to see themselves as agents of the change they wish to see in society,

and this gives rise to their deep intrinsic motivation.

At the risk of sounding prescriptive, I have observed that students who feel supported by the acknowledgement of their prior knowledge and have acquired a certain self-belief and sense of belonging to the college community, start taking charge of their own learning. It takes a year or two of concerted effort on the part of administrators and educators, and of course from students themselves, to create such reflective learners. Aided by scaffolds that are not merely seen as remedial, but as a holistic endeavour, many students eventually become independent thinkers and autonomous learners. Thus, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds too do not necessarily feel deprived in this kind of an educational setting. An independent learner who feels a part of the student community can find sources of deep lifelong motivation. As a teacher, I find that helping students from either end of the spectrum to reach this sort of self-realization is exhilarating.

It is important to note that less than a third of all school students in India go on to study in college². So, although college can help students make the transition and build lasting inner motivation, perhaps it would be better to start the process earlier, when they are still in school. Alternative schools do this reasonably well because of a holistic approach to learning: avoiding

dependence on a rigid curriculum, connecting students with their surroundings, encouraging students' curiosity, giving them space to ask questions, and ensuring that there is cooperative learning.

Some wonderful examples of how to build student motivation and resilience, however, come from the schools run by the social welfare departments of several states in India³. Committed teachers and administrators in these residential schools inculcate important values in their very underprivileged students. Through non-academic means, such as sports, debates, outbound activities and so on, students begin to believe that they can achieve their goals through hard work and perseverance. Our university admits several such students a year from these schools, and it is evident that they are better prepared to face many of the challenges common at this level. I recall that an undergraduate physics student who had come from such a school once requested me for a reduced course load over the next two semesters, so that he could spend more time on existing coursework. Even the fact that he felt he could ask for such a concession was itself commendable. Of course, we did what was possible to help him, and today he works in data science projects of the Ministry of Rural Development. Further, our college alumni from these schools have created important social networks that new entrants from their

schools can tap into, handing them a cultural and social advantage that many new students do not have. Given that a college education is still a luxury that many cannot access in India, it is crucial that students develop this awareness and such capabilities in school.

A year has passed. The sheepish-looking students in the summer programme of the previous year are now blossoming in both predictable and unpredictable ways. Many are planning summer research projects and looking for internships. They are developing specific interests which they articulate clearly. They approach me with requests to write them letters of recommendation and put them in contact with researchers in various institutes.

While my instinct is to tell them to take a well-earned break over the summer, I know that they are eager to have new experiences and further develop their interests. The desire to spend a summer break working is testament to their motivation to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Some of their privileged counterparts already have internships lined up, and many of those may be in social service organisations. They describe how their interest in working with migrant communities or in urban slum schools was piqued by attending 'Understanding India' courses. I see that a social chasm has narrowed. My colleagues and I are already looking forward to the coming year.



Endnotes

1. Arjun Jayadev, 'Meeting Life at Eighteen: Some experiences at an undergraduate program', *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*, Issue 24, January 2020, see: <https://www.journal.kfionline.org/issue-24/meeting-life-at-eighteen-some-experiences-at-an-undergraduate-program>
2. AISHE Report, <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report/>, 2021-22
3. Bollam Karunakar, 'Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society: Programs and Facilities Available for Students Empowerment', *Educational Quest: An Int. J. of Education and Applied Social Science*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 125-133, December 2019.

The Imperative of Climate Education

PALLAVI PHATAK



Schooling is designed around futures that are collapsing. And yet, if you ask anyone what they think is wrong with the education system, you can easily guess the typical answers. What if I were to tell you that fixing any of those issues will still not prepare the children of today for the present climate-altered reality? This is a challenge that they will feel more acutely in the future. This is because the design and content of formal schooling are largely built on a blueprint that serves the very economic paradigms that have put us in the global mess that we have today. To tweak and refine the existing ‘system’—through better pedagogy, curricula, teachers or infrastructure—is like missing the wood for the trees.

The call for climate education is getting stronger and clearer, but what is ‘climate education,’ considering that in some form or the other environmental education has been a part of the curriculum of most Indian examination boards after the Supreme Court verdict of 1992 made it mandatory? Why is there a new imperative, given that global and national policy imperatives like the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 talk of learning about ‘environmental management’ and ‘sustainability’? Meanwhile, Article 12 of the Paris Agreement (2015) and Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) have also established a mandate for ‘climate education.’ These resolutions clearly indicate that we are politically and legally required to add these topics to the core curriculum as independent subjects.

A change in nomenclature to ‘climate education’ is also a call to bring about a shift in consciousness, putting education front and centre to prepare individuals to handle the crises caused by anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change. This does not mean just improving the related

curricula or pedagogy, although this is indeed important. It must recognize the fact that education is a crucial human activity that both shapes and is shaped by socio-political and economic systems and can play a truly significant role in helping us reimagine the future.

There are several posited and robustly contested perspectives on whether climate education should be considered and taught as a discipline or as a set of skills. The primary contestation is that climate change does not have a firm epistemological basis to warrant a disciplinary status of its own. A ‘green skills’ framework, folding in more complex capacities like ‘inquiry’ and ‘critical thinking’ that expand the possibilities of what skills can do, has been gaining traction. One reading of the tea leaves in this bubbling teapot of research helps us build a thesis: climate education can use a ‘climate lens’ i.e. a systemic focus on sustainability, environment and biodiversity conservation themes to create clear curricular imperatives. What would that mean in practice? The implications are that curricula must:

- shift from just providing information and raising awareness to building an action-oriented outlook;
- have more lessons on the adaptation and resilience for eco-socio-political impacts of climate change;
- enable willing participation in the transition to greener or low-carbon economies;
- equip students for constructive engagement on social justice issues that are exacerbated by climate change;
- and finally, address ‘eco-anxiety’—a mental state that eats into the sense of wellbeing of a fairly large number of young people!

To develop these capacities in individuals, it is important to emphasize that the new curriculum should be interdisciplinary in scope. This also demands intentional rather than incidental pedagogy for collaborative problem-solving and the development of metacognition. It requires learning that is rooted in ‘place’, taking into consideration impacts on nature as well as on people.

Climate education must be seen as an arc through the primary, middle, and secondary years. The primary years are best spent on developing a grounded relationship with nature. Several alternative schools such as the Krishnamurti schools have historically been nature-centric in their

curriculum. They ensure that there is a green cover on their campuses making these a haven for insects, reptiles, birds and mammals. Thus, students can spend a significant amount of time in non-directed play and observation. All this fosters a sensory, non-verbal, and fond relationship with nature that embeds itself in the subconscious. Research today shows that this is crucial for wise planetary stewardship. The special relationship with nature should ideally permeate their homes too, such that parents also pause to watch trees and living things more carefully, and grandparents feel inspired to recall and retell stories in which nature plays an important part.

As much as direct experience of nature is important in forming this caring relationship, so is an exposure to the beauty of multiple disciplines. This could take the form of nature-based themes in painting, music and dance projects, or outdoor science and mathematics projects, or themes in storytelling involving local history and culture—ideally all concurrently. This is key to making the relationship with nature whole—an important basis for well-rounded climate action.

In middle school, as a child's sensibilities have developed enough to take in the wider social context, so the curriculum must offer experiences that can help students think about detrimental factors like fear and power-seeking, and dwell on notions of care and compassion. This is key to priming a student's capacity to understand and act on issues of social justice. Rather than a prescribed structured approach, children in these years need creatively designed, interdisciplinary and interactive lessons, built on contextually relevant intersectional stories. They should be allowed to consider why societies are organized the way they are and imagine what alternative forms of social relationships might be like. For example, there could be a lesson on the build-up of urban heat in cities, a complex but palpable human-induced phenomenon that affects us all, but especially domestic workers in schools and homes, as well as those who work in factories to produce modern conveniences. Such lessons can trigger critical questioning and enable a sense of agency in students through small acts of reconfiguring their relationships with people and places. This would prevent the paralyzing righteousness that can creep into conversations on making the world a better place to live in. Re-imagining human societies begins through the scope provided for this in such early engagements.

The secondary years see young people—as they step out of childhood—get naturally drawn to conversations, experiences and perspectives that

help them understand their place in the world. Rather than helping them understand the ways they ‘fit in’ or don’t, using a climate lens can help them see possibilities of contributing in some small ways and developing their sense of agency. Young people today are not just interested in this, but may subject their teachers to audacious, complex and mind-bending interrogations about everything around them! What if they were to bring their growing awareness, concerns and questions to the curriculum itself? For example, most high school economics syllabuses are still built around traditional growth-oriented theories that have led to our unsustainable ways of life. We could help students find out who gets to choose what we are expected to learn and who gains from these choices? A curriculum for secondary school must harness the power of a young person’s sense of agency by co-designing the curriculum with them, thus showing them that they too can participate in creating a more human world that honours the earth as well as justice for all. This is a potent and enduring antidote against eco-anxiety.

Anthropogenic climate change is a wake-up call for educational curricula. Innovation, critical thinking, teamwork, proactiveness and so on—twenty-first century skills, as they are known—are currently not being developed through school education, and this has often been lamented. However, the very way we imagine the twenty-first century in mainstream discourse and the role of education and what it ought to achieve, fails to centre the biggest crisis of the times. Today, critical thinking skills, collaborative learning or innovation, even if they are taught in schools, are only complicit in perpetuating destructive attitudes vis a vis the planet.

The climate education imperative must make us ask what seem like rudimentary questions, but which are now increasingly urgent ones, on the aims of education. We can no longer be content with plugging in an ‘environmental studies’ syllabus, or teaching individuals to live sustainably and believe that we are preparing individuals for the complex crisis ahead. The impact of climate change will, in waves, keep showing us that we are now beyond the stage where ideas of sustainability have any traction (sustain what? is a legitimate question). A reimagined climate education is the spade that must dig and overturn the soil, and sow the seeds through which regenerative, new, and inclusive futures can grow and thrive.

So, the call to action for the education ecosystem is to commit to and support a complete overhaul of formal education for the future. Curricula

must truly serve our young to create and inhabit a different world. The limitations of information-heavy curricula are being starkly exposed by the advent of AI. The current format does not foster a sense of agency in children, or build the capacity for action, nor encourage true collaboration—all of which they will sorely need in their climate-altered future. If you are a concerned parent, teacher, principal, bureaucrat, policymaker or a young adult, do find the nearest climate education conversation or initiative you can join and participate in mobilizing resources for enabling this shift.



“

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost’s familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.

— Rachel Carson, in *Silent Spring*

Aloneness in Relationship

RAJIV V



Listening to students

The boy continued, ‘Because I am a nerd...!’ The teacher looked at him incredulously and said, ‘But you are not. You are fine!’ She was surprised by her own quick and heartfelt response. The child’s nonchalant acceptance of the way he was being addressed by his classmates irked her. What had once been a distressing remark had now lost its sting, and he no longer seemed affected by it. After all, he had been listening to these comments every day. He said he had found it especially difficult when younger students also joined his classmates’ chorus of ‘Nerd! Nerd! Nerd,’ surprised and hurt that they were students he had never met and consequently did not know him at all. Now he seemed to have resigned himself to the fact that it was something beyond his control, believing it was sensible to keep his reactions to himself. Recovering her composure, the teacher asked, ‘Can you tell me who is supposed to be a nerd?’ The child quickly replied: ‘Someone who reads all the time and is not good at sports.’ The teacher was once again struck by his response and felt most unsettled. She wondered whether the child had arrived at such a conclusion by himself, or other students had told him this. She had more questions but decided to wait and watch the situation instead.

On another occasion, an older student—who had not met the deadline for completing her project work—remarked, ‘I cannot subscribe to this “hustle culture”; it’s mindless, this rushing from one thing to another because of formal requirements.’ And another time, a student protested, ‘Why can’t boys grow long hair? Why do only girls have the advantage of more options?’ Her students’ feelings weighed on the teacher’s mind. They conveyed to her not only how those individuals preferred to act, but also their need to break away from set patterns and explore other possibilities

of personal expression, without having to be anxious about a teacher's disapproval or ensuing consequences. She acknowledged the relevance of these feelings and recognized them as emerging concerns of the times: the opposition to the 'hustle culture' narrative, which promotes the idea that there is always more to strive for, or to being evaluated based on one's gender and sexuality.

So, when another student argued, 'I want to stay in the Art Room and study other subjects. Why can't spaces in school be available to everyone at all times?' she wondered what students really seek every day. Was it companionship, a warm conversation and quiet acknowledgement? She walked along with her students, careful about not overstepping certain boundaries and merely restating norms. While this was difficult for her, she felt concerned and was genuinely interested in the issues they raised. It made sense to her to remain open to their needs, in case she missed something important.

Just then the student who wished to stay in the Art Room pressed for closure: 'It is very unfair. Why can't we decide where we want to study?' What the teacher heard in those words was a plea for freedom; the freedom to act individually out of personal choice. The weight of her students' expectations and the number of times she had lately found herself attending to such situations made her somewhat anxious, for they had not only become more frequent, but the demands also had a rather unnerving quality. Listening to the demand for 'freedom,' she recognized a voice that was not limited to the world of children and adolescents. Its pitch and tone were sharp and assertive, and gathered intensity by drawing upon personal experiences too. What exactly triggered this need to be seen and heard? Perhaps it pointed to an unspoken desire to have secure spaces where one felt nurtured and from which one could draw sustenance.

The boy who was labelled a 'nerd' had wondered what would happen if he told his friends that he enjoyed singing more than football. He feared he might lose many of them and be pigeonholed as a certain 'type' or worse. After all, there are labels for everything and everyone, often for no fault of the individual: 'goody two-shoes'; 'snitch'; 'psycho'; 'mental'! He had heard his friends call others these names and many more. The teacher for her part wondered whether this new assertiveness in her students was just a part of growing up, or a rather stark and unsettling reflection of the society we live in. She asked the boy how many friends he had, to which

he responded with glee, 'Of course, there are three of us! You know what, creating a group creates another group of those who are not a part of it!'

The world of affiliation

Adults also navigate a world that is full of diverse personalities and seek spaces that allow for both self-expression and social exchange. Belonging to a group offers an individual not only a sense of identity, but also a rationale for acting in certain ways. Each group has unique markers — symbols of affiliation that then become extensions of the individual — and offer the individual a place as a unique member of a community. The differences of opinion, colours of thought, and shades of behaviour found in groups contribute to the texture and strength of a society. Diversity stimulates thought to begin with, but as more groups emerge, so does a sharpened vision, one that begins to categorise individuals and collectives into fixed emotional and ideological aggregates and labels them accordingly.

A binary vision selects and isolates some and engages only with what it finds relevant. It seeks to understand society by mapping broader patterns of behaviour in people and sorting individual expressions of thought into recognizable forms of social behaviour. This is the most superficial form of engagement found in society, and results in a highly subjective understanding of human feelings and reactions. As a process, it involves creating mind maps (or algorithms) that record footprints of associations and responses, rendering them finite, legible and graspable. It becomes both a description of the actual experience and an abstraction of lived realities.

In this abstract scenario, when individuals exercise choice and personalize experiences, their choice of certain options tends to introduce or reinforce associated norms and expectations, which then become general reference points for judging others' choices and according social approval. In a world of expanding choices, more and more trajectories are continually formed, crisscrossing around individual affinities. It is like the glistening trail left by a snail, silent, solitary, making tentative discoveries across an unfamiliar terrain. A single person can be any one or many of these: teacher, athlete, theatre artist, parent, chef, environmentalist, singer, librarian and believer in gender equality.

The measure of freedom

For the young, who are still growing physically, emotionally and mentally, the freedom to explore is a basic need, regulated and necessitated by the natural process of growth. It is distinct from what is externally designed,

curated around individual interests, and which offers various contexts of social engagement. It is the inner drive of the young that stimulates their exploration of the environment, and which in turn is awakened by such explorations.

As a child discovers the world, she finds herself following well-laid 'paths' across the unfamiliar terrain of social interaction. Here she spends considerable time observing how others respond to what she does and how she behaves. Gradually, she begins to organize her experiences, along with the emotions and expressions of thought that accompany them, into types. She also discerns which of them elicit approval from her immediate social group. Classifying experiences this way is an act of becoming aware, both of one's environment and one's own thinking. However, when other people's biases begin to control her, her subtle assertion of her own preferences begins to alter the natural bent of her sense-making. As each one traverses along this path of exploration of interests, ideas and people, there is often a tightening grip of beliefs and opinions that are immediately gratifying, while other challenging ones are left out.

Likewise, exercising choice gives a new meaning to the experience of 'freedom.' Freedom of choice now lies in the corridors of a marketplace, where one can find something so perfectly aligned to one's desires that it cannot easily be disregarded. If one loses interest in the item later, one can always go back to 'Choice land' and have the pleasure of choosing again. As sociologist Nikolas Rose writes in his book *The Powers of Freedom*:

Modern individuals are not merely 'free to choose,' but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make.

This aspect of freedom has a trajectory that views self-growth as an end in itself. It creates a new vocabulary of 'success' and 'failure' that evaluates how freedom is realized in terms of the choices made by the individual.

Through participation in social interactions, a young adult becomes deeply aware of a world beyond the self. This awareness often brings with it a growing sense of aloneness, but also a sense that social integration may be possible through first identifying one's own abilities and vulnerabilities. A feeling of separation can lead to intense anxiety and insecurity, especially if it does not nudge the individual towards forming new associations or sensing how to relate to the world. A true measure of freedom, then, is the

extent of openness one develops not through exercising specific skills, but through discerning the social character of one's experiences; and becoming aware of the impact of one's own habits of thinking and acting on one's social interactions.

Being alone

A senior school student once asked me, 'What defines good? How can I sustain those good qualities when times are bad or hard? How can I interact in society without contributing to its corrupt ways?' Of late, young people increasingly feel that the world is becoming a lonely place, where one is left alone with one's own questions and thoughts. Much of this student's anxiety stemmed from the fact that after the oncoming school exams, he would need to enter a new and unfamiliar space: university life. His question clearly points to the diminishing spaces to sustain fuller conversations. It is also indicative of a growing urge to connect and break barriers....and that he was not quite sure how to go about it.

In response to the question, 'What is the definition of a good world?' Krishnamurti challenges the very notion of a 'good world', and cautions against getting caught up in definitions and words:

Now, why does the mind ask such a question? What is the definition of a good world? The statement is clear; you can look it up in the dictionary and there you will find a definition. We think that by finding a definition we have understood the problem. This is how we are trained; we think we understand when we have a definition. But definition is not understanding; on the contrary, it is the most destructive way of thinking. Why do you want to know the definition of the good world? We have to understand what the word implies, and we have to create a world which is good. It is no good being carried away by words. We are always taught from childhood what to think, but never how to think.

If education is meant to be preparation for life, how important is it to build one's relationship with the world? For a young adult, experiencing the breadth of human life and some of its realities first-hand not only nurtures a more complex world view, but also creates awareness of one's own place within it. Education must engage the student entirely, not merely in the description of actual issues and problems that people face, but by carefully examining different perspectives, help in developing a deeper understanding and better articulation of concerns and questions. The challenge for educators lies in creating a space where there is possibility of

listening to the different assumptions, including one's own, and becoming aware of different patterns of resistance that arise from within. Such spaces hold deep meaning for students. When a greater interest in reason is kindled in them, they develop an open approach to learning, and do not hesitate to scrutinize even their own ideas or raise questions in the interest of achieving clarity. Such an approach requires both the ability to be alone and to listen attentively. Aloneness, here, is linked to exercising one's mind to be sensitive and observing one's inner responses while engaging with others.

A student once recounted: 'Initially, I also found myself doing what a group does or changing what I actually like to do or what I say, because of what other people think or like. My thinking at that time was that if I do this, it will help build connections with people and help me relate to them. Like if someone likes a particular movie, you might say you like the same movie even if you don't actually like it. I realized soon that I can't live many lives like this. What I did instead was to have a conversation about why each of us actually likes or dislikes the movie. After all that is also a connection, isn't it? Some people I found were stuck with their opinions. I think in that case it is necessary to help them understand their rigidity also, like I mentioned earlier. After my realization of all that I mentioned, I have tried to apply these things, yet sometimes I still get caught in the same mess, but since I am conscious about it, I am able to catch myself and remember.'

When an observed external reality resonates with internal patterns of thought, it sparks greater interest and freedom in studying the reasons for the phenomenon or situation, rather than merely articulating ideals of what one should do or how one should act. As Krishnamurti notes, 'If I can understand the actual thing as it is then I can deal with it, then I can break it down.' He suggests further that one is 'truly related only when one is alone'. In this context, being 'truly related' means meeting a fact directly, when one's mind is inwardly quiet and can therefore genuinely relate to a given situation. The quality of one's responses would then be quite distinctive, not something determined by what might have been internalized from the social groups one is part of.



On Being a Teacher in a Small School

SHARAD JAIN



The role of a teacher in a small school based on Krishnamurti's teachings is difficult to define. This is not because all the big and small tasks required of the teacher are impossible to list; but more so because many of these tasks are ever emerging as fresh situations present themselves. I would liken this most to living together in a large joint family where one is responsible for everything. It is not that every task depends on your doing it; but that you must keep abreast of all ongoing activities so that you can take decisions that maintain a wholesome family dynamic.

These schools have been established as 'centres of learning' both for adults as well as children. What makes a place a 'centre of learning'? This is a primary question for the teacher. While it may be impossible to 'know' what creates a place of learning, it is possible to discern what comes *in the way of* learning. This 'negative' approach enables easier discernment and thus becomes an important guiding factor.

An educator in these schools has many responsibilities and not because these responsibilities have been 'given' to one. That would make the 'giver' of responsibilities an 'authority' and the one to whom they are 'given to' a subordinate. These responsibilities that need to be shared or *shouldered*—a word we often use at Shibumi! Apart from the fact that there are too many to list here, these responsibilities are also very interconnected. However, for the purpose of communication, I will attempt to categorize them here:

1. Responsibility to the world
2. Responsibility to the school
3. Responsibility to the group of adults or colleagues
4. Responsibility for the work at school
5. Responsibility to the students
6. Responsibility to the parents
7. Responsibility to oneself

In this article I explore the first three of these responsibilities and intend to take up the other aspects in a later article. I feel it would be best to

start with ‘responsibility to the world’, for isn’t that a reason why many of us teachers came to these places? Seeing the disorder in the world, one seeks a place where it is possible to work towards leaving that disorder behind. Meanwhile, of course, we do have to live in that disorder; it is all around us, as well as within us. We cannot wish it away. And just because I come to a place with a different intention, the disorder does not go away. There is often cynicism in young minds regarding the state of the world, not realizing that the cynicism and self-centredness of many generations is the very reason for the present state of the world. The common tendency is to become alienated from the world through seeking distractions, struggling with boredom, or striving for material success. Seeing this, it is important to feel this need to live *in* the world but not be *of* the world, and to communicate this to others. To see for oneself that ‘we are the world’, and show this to others, is among the primary responsibilities of a teacher in these schools.

One of the founders of our school, Kabir Jaithirtha, used to say that the ‘transformation of the mind’ is the biggest part of the work, or even the only work of the school; all else will then find its right place. As a younger person then, I could hardly engage with this statement. As it didn’t make sense, I thought it best to let it be; but I later realized that there can be no interest

in this inquiry into the disorder in the world, if you don’t engage with this ‘impossible question’. Moreover, there is no such thing as transforming only one’s personal or individual mind. No change in this realm can be partial. So, working together as a group, talking through agreements and disagreements, engaging in dialogue, setting aside quiet time, are just some of the ways of keeping a questioning mind alive. One needs to question one’s habits; one’s existing practices both within us and in society; and continue exploring sustainable ideas of change. This creates an atmosphere of inquiry.

This brings me to the second point. A teacher in these schools is both the creator and the protector of the atmosphere of inquiry. Creator, because this atmosphere is not carried forward simply through established practices and structures. It is co-created in the moment. The teacher is also its protector, as this very non-settled quality is the genesis of a fresh mind—a mind that can examine the conditioning and functioning of human consciousness. As soon as we settle into, and accept or reject a way of living, deterioration begins.

Young minds coming into such schools as ours are exposed to a way of living that is not based on rules, but much more on looking, listening, questioning and developing sensitivity. They feel empowered as they discover non-conformist ways of meeting

situations and people who are willing to accompany them through this. They also have a natural curiosity, which would get blunted if we spent all that energy on fighting for or against rules. As a society, our minds are often trained to either conform or rebel, and these urges blunt our perceptions rather than help us develop a sense of clarity and sensitivity to situations.

As an educator, one is constantly juggling many tasks: there are subjects to teach, correction work, keeping in touch with the parents both as a co-enquirer and a teacher of their child, maintenance of school buildings and grounds, kitchen work, administrative work, looking after the well-being of fellow teachers, non-teaching staff, and so on. These tasks may not all appear to be within the purview of a teacher's responsibilities, but in a small school it is important—nay, imperative—that one is involved to some extent in all areas of running the school.

The kitchen at Shibumi is an excellent example to illustrate this. We have a relatively small kitchen here that caters for around sixty people. It is also a collaborative space where many interesting conversations happen: conversations about likes and dislikes, specific preferences, health concerns about food, making contingency plans to meet a fuel shortage, and so on. A lot of excitement is generated around the menu in the morning when a student group comes in to help. Parents who

come to help with the cooking also become a part of these conversations, which continue well beyond the helping hour, spilling over into the classrooms and even back home. In fact, a lot of attitudes as well as vulnerabilities become evident in this context. Teachers need to share this space with the child and the parent, so that the conversation is not merely a negotiation, but also helps one in learning about one's own nature, the human tendency for greed, and social conditioning.

As an example, when the kitchen has chocolates or sweet treats, there is much excitement. A lot of deals are made well before they are served and there is a tendency to take more than one's fair share, or more than is good for one's body. Kitchen duty becomes the occasion to talk about these tendencies. One such moment of clarity came up when a student pointed out that often older people talk about how, as youngsters, they ate a lot more food during weddings and festivals. While this may have been the case, while conversing we realize that this was in fact greed, and does not need to be repeated just for the pleasure of recounting stories from one's youth. While one need not feel guilty for past actions, one must not offer it as a justification for such behaviour in the present. There is, instead, the possibility of learning a different response *now*, and both the teacher and the student can participate in this together.

The sports field is another place where a lot of instinctive emotions come to the surface. It is not only a space to build physical fitness and team spirit, but also a 'laboratory' for studying the effects of comparison and cruelty, as well as the benefits of acceptance and working together. When the playground is occupied by a mixed-age group, including adults from the school community, it can become a very inclusive space. Minimizing competition does not just imply not keeping the 'score' against other teams, but ensuring that all players feel included. This requires complete commitment and not fussing about individual abilities. It becomes a delight to share such a space with students where at one level we are all equal, yet at another the teacher remains the more responsible presence.

On one occasion the senior school students were very keen on organizing an in-house football tournament with four teams, each team including people of all ages. There was a lot of care in the proposal, in which the proposed teams, apart from all the students, every teacher who was fit, wished to or could be persuaded to play were included. The six-to-ten age group would play a twenty-minute-long game and earn points for their teams. Then the older ones would play. Since we had spoken a lot about why competitions are not encouraged in our schools, the older students were sure that their whole-hearted participation would be the most

important thing and that feelings such as anger, hate, jealousy, shame, elation or superiority would not arise. But as we went through the tournament, these raw emotions did emerge and could not be hidden. Fifteen minutes were set aside every day after the game to talk about what came up. The fact that the teachers were present on the field ensured that we had open conversations. These conversations were amazing and this way of co-creating a learning space has been an incredible experience.

For the adult and the child, coming to school signifies something slightly different. It is generally assumed that while children come to school for a wide range of learning, the teachers mostly come to share with them their specific field of knowledge. However, in a small school if adults come in with a very specialized attitude towards learning, based on their subject preferences, it is impossible to create a holistic learning atmosphere. There needs to be an overall interest in the school's whole programme to be able to understand what allows for or blocks the flow of learning in students and in themselves. This requires a much broader interest and an ongoing dialogue between the teachers. Only through such a dialogue can self-learning gain vitality. Therefore, even while teaching their subjects, adults must keep in mind an overall sense of what the students are learning at all times.

The teachers, along with parents, are children's windows to the world as well as their filtering mechanism. Many kinds of influences are waiting to grab and tame the mind, and at a much faster rate in today's world. An influence, by definition, is something one gets attracted to. Students often display curiosity for what is in vogue, while also having a fear of being left out. This becomes a difficult area for them to navigate by themselves. When mass influences affect students, teachers often become the 'filter' that stands between them and the influence. A teacher can raise questions and open conversations, not with the intention of influencing them in another way, but to give them a taste of a questioning, inquiring approach that shows the possibility of not just succumbing to influences or being indifferent to a situation. Many a time one needs to be the blocker of influences too. Children need protection from exposure to harmful media or drugs; they also need to be helped to question the normalizing of inappropriate sexual behavior or violence in society. Only then can their minds become sensitive to these dangers.

School excursions are another significant opportunity for journeying together with students. These are possibly the most memorable learning experiences that a student can have. While family holidays tend to be comfort-driven and exclusive affairs,

with limited opportunities of meeting or learning from others, school trips are designed to be a window into the wider world. They can also be fun and full of unexpected possibilities. Last year, on a school trip to Gujarat, about ten of us were trekking along the beach between Somnath and Porbandar. We heard of a small Hanuman temple built by a German woman that allowed travellers to stay overnight. Curious, we made our way there to find a beautifully-built mosaic structure — a perfect labour of love — that not only allowed us to stay but also provided us with food. There was another large group there of *padayatris* (walking pilgrims) from all over India who were on a pilgrimage from Somnath to Dwarka. It was an incredible experience, listening to their stories and songs. We all shared the dormitory and the stars for one night, and then went our own way the next morning.

It is understandable that middle-class ideas of travel are changing rapidly, with plenty of 'packaged' experiences, and so most adults don't have an exposure to more open-ended ways of traveling. However, schools like ours do manage to carry on such trips to some extent. An important factor in their continuity is the stories passed down from one batch of students to another. As the main responsibility for organizing school trips lies with the teachers, these trips are only possible if there are teachers who have experienced

such excursions and are around to guide younger teachers in undertaking such trips. When the teacher body is itself changing rapidly, it is easy to lose this important pillar of education.

This brings me to the responsibility of continuing to work in such schools. While it is true that meeting challenges and responding to situations happens in the moment, a deepening of enquiry comes by engaging with it over some years. If a student comes to the school for twelve years, and if his teacher is there only for part of that time, say, three or four years, there will be an imbalance in the relationship. Teachers, like parents, are pillars in a student's life. A constantly changing teacher body doesn't allow for the school to become a stable space where inquiry can take root. For adults who are easily prone to moving on, it shows a certain lack of clarity of mind, for one should come to a 'centre of learning' because one is interested in the process of inquiry.

However, no place is ever perfect, since the community that holds the place is made up of the people who are there, with their various talents, tendencies, as well as discontent. Instead of continuing to question oneself and working at one's discontent, if one simply moves away, the inquiry weakens and old confusions remain. Therefore, the responsibility of a teacher is to question, be questioned, not lose affection, and so participate in clearing the clutter. In a small school, this

cannot be someone else's responsibility. This is the only way we can create more such centres of inquiry. Without such a living culture of inquiry, questions will subside, and only the institution will remain.

The role of each person in the group, or the *sangha*, as my friend and colleague Tanushree calls it, is essential. The group is working together to co-create the school. It can never be an individual's vision or effort. Many brains, hands and shoulders are needed to sustain a school, its physical running as well as its broader curriculum. One needs to talk together, challenge, be challenged, and change when needed so that such a living environment of inquiry can thrive. In this process of working together, many tendencies are revealed and challenged. It is the responsibility of the individual as well as the group that these challenges are made and accepted with affection. Conflicts remain conflicts only when the 'personal' feels threatened and one closes up; otherwise, this can be an occasion for together attempting to come upon clarity in various situations.

The true purpose of inquiry is to arrive at clarity. The personal angle may come up regularly in our lives, but that does not make it more valid. There cannot be 'my clarity' and 'your clarity'; there is only clarity. Therefore, the notions of agreeing, disagreeing and agreeing to disagree are rooted in the false. This is an aspect of working

together in which we need to look after each other. Reading Krishnamurti's writing and having a dialogue together can often act as a great checkpoint in this learning. These writings always pose a direct challenge and do so with utmost love and affection. They are directed at each individual and are yet cannot be construed as personal challenges. This seems to me like the only way of living and working together. Otherwise, we will find ourselves very often at the crossroads of conflict, with the exit route feeling like the most feasible road to take.

The group of people in a small school inevitably spend a lot of time

together and for this reason too we have great responsibility for each other's well-being. Well-being is not a personal thing; it is always in the context of the group. The right food, proper exercise, enough money, quiet time, time for engaging in interests—these are no longer seen as one's personal lookouts but are supported by the group. Things might not always work out according to each one's expectations, but immense possibilities open up when people come to think and feel together. And this needs participation, openness and a capacity to look beyond the personal and consider the whole.



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Intelligence is the capacity to perceive the essential, the what is; to awaken this capacity, in oneself and in others, is education.

— J. Krishnamurti, in *Education and the Significance of Life*

Listening Beyond the Noise

KRITHIKA THANDAPANI



When I began writing reports for my students, I found myself pausing—not because I lacked words, but because I was held back by a question that I could not frame. I was thinking of a seven-year-old child in my class, a child who fidgeted constantly, filed the edge of his scale repeatedly until one end had become triangular in shape, and rarely sat still. Yet, when questions were posed in class he responded intuitively, expressing his understanding through language that felt personal and comfortable. As I prepared to describe his learning progress and participation in a report to his parents, I stopped. What could I say? Could I tell them that the child was learning to listen, even though he was physically restless?

My hesitation brought me face-to-face with my assumptions about listening. Can I assume that only a child who sits still, stays upright and is quiet is actually listening, while the one who moves is not? Where did such expectations come from, and why had I neglected to examine them? I noticed this assumption surfacing in other moments too: a child doodled in his notebook while I was speaking—and yet was able to answer questions accurately; a student gazed out of the window instead of listening—but later recalled the details of a story with precision; the one who hummed softly during a class discussion could still thoughtfully build on a peer's idea. Each instance made me look again at what listening might actually mean in a classroom.

Often, in a noisy classroom I have observed that the noise hardly disrupts students' work. Children continue talking, moving about, negotiating with each other about which materials to use, orienting themselves to one another, all at once. When a task is introduced, especially one that requires making a choice or collaborating with others, the noise has a different rhythm. Some conversations continue, others cease, and

most children seem to settle into their work with involvement. They are engaged, absorbed, and work harmoniously in their own ways. I stay with the noise, intervening only when the sound tips from the humming of shared engagement into a note of disturbance or exclusion. I have noticed similar patterns during group projects, open-ended art projects and group discussions, where an initial swell of sound gives way to sustained focus in their interactions.

This has led me to a different question. If engagement in a task is possible regardless of the ambient noise, will a higher volume of it disturb some children? For instance, during our Project Day preparations, we went as a group to study our school's water system. The children observed the pipes and connections across different buildings, and many questions were asked in quick succession. As we were about to complete the tour, one student quietly moved away and sat on the sand near the playground. I later asked her why and she said she had had a question to ask but did not voice it. When I enquired further, she said that since others were repeatedly raising their hands, she did not feel inclined to do the same. The volume and pace of participation seemed to have silenced her.

On another occasion, we were together preparing apple sandwiches in our dining hall. The room was buzzing with the children's chatter and movement. In the midst of this, one child stepped outside, saying that the space felt too noisy and that he did not feel well in it. The activity continued, yet his response revealed how noisy enthusiasm can be overwhelming for some.

Reflecting on the art of listening in the classroom, I hear from some children—especially those who are soft-spoken—that they must raise their voices simply to be heard. This unsettles me, and I wonder what kind of space we should create in a classroom, wherein one needs to raise one's voice in order to be heard. I also see that classroom noise is not produced by children alone. Adults may also contribute to classroom noise by issuing repeated instructions, or by speaking louder in the effort to manage classroom behaviour. There are overlapping conversations going on too, and everyone feels the urgency to be heard above the din. In such a space, the volume slowly replaces attentiveness, and listening itself becomes competitive rather than relational.

At the other end of the spectrum are children who are consistently loud. I wonder how to listen to them with understanding and sensitivity—

and not superficially, not by repeatedly asking them to lower their volume? How can I hear the need for attention in their voices if they speak so loud? Krishnamurti reminds us that ‘listening is an art, not a mechanical process. To listen, there must be an inward quietness, a freedom from strain’. I find myself exploring this inward quietness—what it is, why it is so difficult to sustain in a classroom, and how classroom noise might affect students who are listening attentively and quietly? Perhaps it is not merely the absence of noise that matters, but also the quality of attention that is unhurried and receptive. With the pressures of following a routine, meeting expectations, and responding to constant needs, the quietness in classrooms just seems to slip away....

As I ponder these questions, I see that my inquiry does not stop with the classroom. It turns inward. I realize that I tend to respond to louder voices, especially ones that insist on something, repeat what has been said, and all in all, demand immediate attention. These voices dominate, interrupt and drown quiet perception. When I listen only to them, I get caught up and carried away. To listen beyond this outward noise requires that a teacher pauses long enough to take notice of what lies beneath the urgency—feelings, uncertainties, or insights that do not announce themselves loudly, yet are seeking recognition.

There have been other moments when, having noticed a child’s quietness, I have found multiple interpretations promptly arising in my mind—for instance, whether the child does not enjoy dancing? Is she uncomfortable with the group? Here, I am reminded of an incident during a Parents’ Day practice—twenty participants were divided into pairs. One student remained very quiet from the beginning. When I eventually asked her about the dance, she not only responded but also surprised me with what she said. She suggested a few movements that could take our performance to an all-new level. Her idea was enthusiastically received by the entire group, and they were happy to incorporate the new steps into their dance routine. What I had first read as withdrawal was actually observation and introspection.

On another occasion, during a class discussion following a field trip to a lake, one participant was sitting by a window, absorbed in thought. When I asked him gently what he was thinking about, I found out that he was unhappy that a schoolmate who was absent that day had missed the experience. His consideration for this fellow student had

not been outwardly visible. Thinking back, I begin to see how easily a quick assumption can overcome quieter perceptions and how much more becomes perceptible if I pause long enough to listen.

As I return to writing reports, this question of how best to approach listening remains. I begin to feel that it is one that accepts both restlessness and stillness, noise and quiet. Perhaps one cannot prescribe how to listen, especially to children; neither is it a behaviour I can easily communicate to them. It also demands a different quality of attention from me—one that does not measure compliance or the ability to stay still. Listening differently, then, may involve resisting the impulse to label or correct, and instead patiently observing and meeting whatever is unfolding in class with an open mind. Without rushing to name or fix this approach, I sense that listening to what is beyond the noise—both outer noise and inner insistence—requires greater care and humility. I am still learning what that asks of me.



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In listening there is no grasping, no taking. All that is listened to comes to us. The relaxed brain is in a state of natural non-function, simply attentive without any specific direction. We can never objectify listening, because that would mean to put it in the frame of space and time. It is listening to oneself.

—Jean Klein, *Dialogue at the Day of Listening, Fairfax, California: May 22, 1991*

Where Every Child Belongs

Stories from an Inclusive Classroom

SARANYA RENGARAJAN



Inclusion in schools is often talked about as a set of rules or practices. In the classroom it feels more like a natural part of the day. It shows up in moments that are easy to miss. I noticed it when a child stopped at the door, looked around the room and another child scooted over to make space for her on the bench without being asked.

Over time I have started to see inclusion not as something we do for a few children, but as a way of being with all children. This change has not been easy or complete. It has made me question my thoughts about ability, participation and what it means to 'fit in'. Inclusion starts with how we see things.

This is connected to the idea that inclusion is a state of being and not something we have to strive for. When it becomes a part of who we are, children can find their place in the world even if they learn differently.

As I watch the classroom closely, I see that it is a complex social world in

itself. Relationships form quietly, but they can also break and that is when individuals are left out.

One morning, in a small group activity, a child who struggled with writing moved away from her circle. Before I could step in, another child pulled her in again saying, 'You can sit with us; we are still figuring it out.' I almost intervened to 'guide' the process and help the first child, but something stopped me. Watching that moment unfold on its own taught me something about trust. There have been times when I have stepped in too quickly only to realize later that I had prevented children from responding to each other. These moments have helped me figure out when to act and when to step aside.

These thoughts do not stay with me alone. At school, they become part of conversations with other teachers. I remember a discussion with a colleague who was unsure about changing an assignment for one student because she worried that it might not be fair to others. What followed in our discussion

was a deeper look into what fairness means. We started to see fairness not as ‘sameness’, but more as ‘responsiveness’. Such conversations have slowly changed our practice as teachers. Our classrooms have become more flexible and meaningful. Our conversations also help to remind us that compassion cannot co-exist with conditions or fixed ideas—it needs an unbiased and individual understanding of each child.

Children can also change our understanding in unexpected ways. During a storytelling session, a child who rarely spoke came forward. He chose to express himself through gestures. There was a pause. I felt the urge to explain or translate, but I did not. The class watched attentively. When he finished, another child said, ‘I understood your story.’ In that moment, expression went beyond words, the classroom made space for his different style of expression. These experiences remind me that learning need not always follow a set plan. Children themselves show us ways of seeing and understanding.

Working this way has its challenges. There are days when I wonder if I am doing enough for some children. On other days, I worry that the support I offer may set them apart. I also notice that I get impatient at times, especially when the pace of learning in my classroom slows down. These moments are uncomfortable, but they are also

important. They ask me to look at my reactions and biases without turning away.

Inclusion is not about what we do outwardly. It is also about paying attention to our thoughts and feelings. Inclusion grows through consistent actions. One child waits for another to finish speaking. A group of students in class adjusts the pace of their discussion without being told so as to include those who are getting left behind. A teacher chooses to pause instead of intervening in a situation.

There are times when exclusion becomes visible and cannot be overlooked. A child is not invited to join a group. Another is ignored during a discussion. Sometimes a child is openly told, ‘You can’t play with us.’ These moments have an uncomfortable urgency. A teacher’s immediate response is often to correct such behaviour and insist on inclusion.

However, simply telling children to include someone does not always change what they feel. It may create a surface-level adjustment, but the underlying resistance often remains. I have noticed that when inclusion is enforced, it can become mechanical. A child may agree and make space for another, but the quality of that space is affected; the other may still feel unwelcome. What seems more necessary in these moments is to slow down and understand what is taking place beneath

the action. Exclusion happens for a reason, even if it is one that has not been fully thought out. It may originate in frustration, discomfort, unfamiliarity, or even the desire to protect one's place within a group.

In one instance, a group of children refused to include a peer during a game. Instead of stepping in right away, I chose to observe for a while. There was a clear pattern. Each time the child joined, the game would stop and restart. The other children grew irritated. Later, in individual conversations, they told me that the game got 'spoiled' because the child did not follow the rules of their game. This shifted the way I saw the situation. The exclusion was not simply an act of rejection. It was connected to their need for order and continuity in play. At the same time, the child who was excluded shared that she often did not fully understand the rules and felt hesitant to ask.

Bringing these two perspectives into the open changed the direction of the conversation. Instead of setting standards of behaviour, we began to look together at what makes a shared activity work. We spoke about clarity, patience and the possibility that not everyone will enter a game with the same level of confidence. I asked the group what they could do differently the next time. Their responses were simple: they could explain rules clearly, hold a practice round, and allow for

some mistakes without stopping and re-starting the game each time.

A few days later, I watched the same group play the game again. There were still moments of tension and occasional pauses, but they paused more to explain rather than exclude. The child who was left out earlier got to stay in the game for longer. It was not a complete transformation, but it was a real shift in attitude.

There are also quieter forms of exclusion that are easier to miss. A child may not be directly rejected but is consistently overlooked: the last to be chosen, his ideas ignored, staying on the edge of a group activity without being drawn in. These patterns can continue for days if they are not noticed and tackled. In such situations, I find it helpful to gently bring attention to what is happening without singling anyone out harshly. Simple prompts can make a difference: 'we haven't heard from everyone yet,' or 'has your group included all voices?' or 'who else can we bring into this?' These small reminders can help to widen participation without creating defensiveness or resentment.

At the same time, I remain careful not to turn inclusion into a performance. If children begin to include others only because they are being watched or corrected, they do not learn from the experience. The aim is to help them see what exclusion does to others and to the atmosphere in their group.

There have been times when I ask children to reflect on their experiences: I ask them, 'have you ever felt left out?' Almost every child can recall such moments. When they speak about it, their tone of voice changes. There is less justification and more recognition of the impact of being excluded. This does not immediately change their behaviour, but it makes a point which we can return to and discuss later.

There are times when exclusion has a sharper edge. A child may be excluded repeatedly, or others' behaviour may be hurtful. In such cases, it is important for teachers to intervene immediately. Waiting too long may allow patterns to settle. A classroom must feel safe for every child. Even in these moments, I try to remain understanding, rather than accusation. Instead of saying, 'This is wrong,' I might begin with, 'Tell me what happened...'. Talking to each child separately often reveals details that are not visible on the surface. One child may have felt threatened; another felt ignored; another did not fully understand the impact of their words.

After listening, bringing the group together for a shared conversation can help. I keep my questions simple and direct: 'what happened?'; 'how did that feel?'; 'what can we do differently next time?' These questions keep the focus on awareness rather than blame.

Sometimes, practical structures support inclusion. For example,

assigning rotating roles in group work can ensure that no child is consistently left out. Pairing children differently across activities can widen interaction. In a class of twenty-five students, even changing groupings once a week gradually shifts social patterns. Over a month, a child who usually interacts with only two or three peers may begin to connect with eight or ten. At the same time, I stay cautious about over-structuring every interaction. If every group is assigned and every role is fixed, children may not learn how to navigate relationships on their own. There needs to be space for them to choose, to struggle, and to find their way through these situations with guidance rather than control.

Language also plays an important role. The way I respond in the moment sets a tone. A sharp correction may stop such behaviour quickly but can also block openness. A quieter response, such as 'let's pause and look at what's happening....', can create room for reflection without escalating the situation.

There are moments when I choose not to intervene immediately, even when exclusion is visible. This is often difficult. It requires that I trust that the children concerned are capable of responding differently. At times, this trust is validated. A child steps in, includes another, or questions the exclusion. At other times, nothing

changes, and I need to step in anyway. Both outcomes are part of the process.

I have also noticed that exclusion is not fixed to certain children. A child who excludes someone in one situation may herself feel excluded in another. In other words, roles may shift. Seeing this helps to avoid labelling children as being either 'inclusive' or 'exclusive' in outlook. It keeps the focus on behaviour as something that can be understood and changed.

Another important aspect is how the rest of the class responds. Often, exclusion continues because others remain silent. Encouraging children to notice and respond to such situations can gradually change this. When one child calls to another to join the group, it carries a different weight than if a teacher says it. Over time, these small responses begin to build a different classroom culture. Inclusion is no longer dependent on constant adult supervision; it starts to emerge within a group.

What I am learning through these experiences is that addressing exclusion is not about finding the right technique. It is about staying attentive, asking the right questions, and allowing time for understanding to grow. It asks for consistency. One conversation is

rarely enough. These themes must be discussed again and again, each time with slight shifts in tone and point of view.

Yet, there are still moments when I feel uncertain — I wonder whether I should have stepped in sooner or held back for longer, or I question whether a child felt sufficiently supported. These questions do not always have clear answers, but they keep the inquiry alive.

When I look back, the most meaningful changes have not come from strict rules or immediate corrections. They have come from sustained attention to how children relate to one another, from listening closely and from allowing space for them to see, feel and respond. These moments do not draw attention to themselves, but they shape the culture of the classroom. When children start to respond to each other with care, the classroom begins to feel different: more open, more alive. Perhaps that is the point when inclusion is no longer something we must try to achieve; it is something that we already live with; it is something that we see in the classroom every day. The idea of inclusion is what makes the classroom feel like a place where every child belongs.



Social and Emotional Well-being: Engaging the Inner Lives of Students

RINA RAPHAEL



Education, as Krishnamurti envisioned, is not a preparation for life but the process of understanding life itself. As educators, we ought to thus ponder over what education truly means. Is our intent merely to endow our students with knowledge and explicit skills? Or is it also about leading them towards being mindful of themselves, becoming aware of their doings and emotions, and how their actions affect themselves, others and the world around them?

Education beyond the academic framework

The present age is fast-paced and in a state of constant flux. The lives of children are often steered by the urge to succeed, the pressure for acceptance, the need for social validation, and by competition. In a world that is mediated by technology, children have increasing access to forms of personal interaction such as social media. What influence does the latter have on young minds? We see that a lot of children's reactions today are driven by **fear**: fear of being

seen as different; fear of failure; fear of not keeping up with peers; fear of not being accepted in a social circle.

The pandemic not only caused mayhem with health and academic routines, but also blurred emotional boundaries, making children and young people feel far more vulnerable. Even as education systems were trying to fit and adjust to the new normal, it was noticed that there were changes in students' academic growth and ability to learn. Children experienced more uneasiness and disappointment; they suffered from boredom and isolation too as they were cut off from their erstwhile social circles. This demanded the attention of educators. As a result, once the pandemic abated many schools added Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a new subject in their curriculum. This approach is markedly different from the way school education was perceived and handled decades ago. The National Educational Policy 2020 in India recognized the need to cater to the mental well-being of children

along with their academic progress. Research in psychology too upheld this approach, by suggesting that students would learn more readily if they felt supported emotionally. This indicates the need to create a *safe space* in every school—a space where one can be more open, knowing that one will not be judged or labelled; a space that gives the child a sense of security and reassurance. This *safe space* narrows the gap between a child's inner world and his or her capacity to deal with the realities and demands of the outer world.

Social Emotional Well-being as a subject

Fear, comparison and conformity, as Krishnamurti pointed out, are invisible barriers that come in the way of learning. Recognizing the potential in these factors to constrict curiosity and stifle independent thinking, we have attempted at the Rishi Valley School to incorporate multiple support systems into the learning process. The subject Social Emotional Well-Being (SEW) in our school programme, therefore, has an important role in the curriculum. In it, we prioritize observation, awareness, and inquiry as opposed to instruction and moralizing. SEW did not begin as a clearly structured programme, but rather it was given form and content by learnings that gradually developed out of our collective awareness of what children needed as they navigated their way through many stages while growing up. Based on this collective awareness,

a few workshops on the theme of 'Growing Up' were initially conducted with students of different age groups, in which free-flowing conversations could take place as they would in a natural setting. They heightened our awareness of issues such as self-image, bodily changes, relationships with peers, and the emotional hurdles that emerge as children grow into teenagers. In recent years, this was further deepened through workshops conducted by educators, counsellors and practitioners like Lois Englebert, Dr. Suchitra Ramkumar, Gloria Burret, and Dr. Namitha Ranganathan. These engagements enabled us to initiate the SEW programme, with an emphasis on reaching the child's inner world and empathizing with how they feel, emote and behave. Our dialogues with these experts made us realize that the SEW sessions could not be episodic. Such an area needs consistent attention. We also saw that teachers who were in regular contact with students needed to hold these sessions so that they could listen attentively to them, empathize fully and formulate a careful response.

An evolving pedagogical approach

SEW sessions are now held once a fortnight in Rishi Valley with two facilitators who work as a team with each of the age groups across the school. The content of the sessions did not have a definite direction in the beginning; we felt our way forward with the help of our students. We would sometimes

begin with a warm-up activity, or an icebreaker of some sort — like a game, or with ‘circle time’, all of which helped draw out some of the issues we needed to address together.

One afternoon, during a circle time discussion, a student from a junior class seemed apprehensive and was hesitating to speak up. Finally, she gathered the courage to make a very moving statement: *I did not know that I could say this out loud*. We dwelt gently on that, allowing the whole class to sit with the thought and reflect as a whole on why she might have felt that way—letting them uncover the reasons themselves instead of handing them any conclusions. When we pause in this way, we notice that learning starts not with teaching, but with the student feeling safe to be heard and to ask questions. With this awareness guiding us, the pedagogical approach that we evolved included activities that helped us to discuss students’ inner lives and vulnerabilities, which led to a process of conscious reflection. The students’ articulations of their own experiences enabled teachers to attune themselves emotionally and guide the conversation appropriately. The facilitators evolved different approaches based on age group, their stage of physical and emotional development, as well as the social atmosphere in a group of students. These sessions gradually became characterized by more conversation and fewer periods of

silence. Along with discussions, there was viewing of short films, games, and role-plays. Together these created a safe space that enabled our children to freely voice their concerns and describe confusions that would otherwise be difficult to share.

In the upper elementary section, we start with small yet meaningful themes: understanding change; the value of friendship; the importance of kindness; the power of words; the courage to speak out against social exclusion. There are tiny lessons in how to observe others in kinder ways. The themes widen and extend in middle school. The children explore the various transitions they go through, be it physical, emotional, a shift in identity, and more. They are helped to familiarize themselves with identifying and expressing emotions, building better relationships with others and themselves, learning to empathize with others and avoiding comparisons. They also learn to appreciate and accept differences. In senior school, we enter into an ‘adulthood’ process. Students learn to develop deep personal insight by looking at themselves, understanding why they put on a ‘mask’ at times, identifying the true self, understanding why people create stereotypes and how one should respond to them, dealing with social exclusion and bullying, and becoming aware of how these affect individuals. Gender identity and sexual orientation are discussed with the intent of building an inclusive environment.

Life skills—such as dealing with academic rigour, choosing courses and careers, managing daily tasks, and basic financial literacy—are some other key topics in these sessions.

What worked

I feel so much lighter after talking about it. This statement conveys a lot: that the structure of the programme did not make as much of a difference as did the climate of safety and empathy that embraces every SEW participant. At the start of sessions, we can see students hesitating to open up, particularly those in senior school, but over time they gradually begin to relax and feel safer. They are then able to recognize and express their emotions. A key

learning for us all was that expression of emotions is welcome but not all kinds of behaviour, and that acknowledging a situation is the best way to handle suffering. We noticed that the children's connections with their peers improved, their ability to empathize with others developed, they could examine issues more deeply, they began to understand why classmates acted a certain way and learn to accept it, and finally to identify areas in themselves that needed change. This encouraged kindness and sensitivity towards others and themselves. In the end, what is clear is that when children are seen, heard, and understood, they are better able to take charge of their own social and emotional well-being.



The most powerful relationship you will ever have is the relationship with yourself.

—Diane Von Furstenberg, in *Diane: A Signature Life*

Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.

—Parker Palmer, in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

Rooms that Breathe: Musings on Living and Learning

VIVEK MISHRA



There are two rooms in the house where I live. One is closely surrounded, almost on all sides, by the other buildings nearby. The other room has a building only on one side, while one side is more open. Interestingly, the room that is encircled by other buildings gets quite warm, and I often find myself moving into the other room, which remains surprisingly cool even though it catches a lot of sunlight during the day.

I feel the reason behind this has less to do with how much sunlight the room receives and more to do with how well it can ‘breathe’, because the warm air within can be easily vented into the open air. This is also true of human beings: we too need to find a vent for our feelings now and then. It’s important to listen and absorb, but it’s equally important to forget sometimes, and let things pass. Although it seems unlikely at times, forgetting happens on its own. We try to hold on to a memory and we try to make sense of what had happened, but many times our reason for doing so slips away. Yet, the act of recall itself is not a waste; it is part of the journey.

Sometimes I feel our bodies already know this truth. I wonder—is the body more intelligent than the mind? It seems to know what needs to be thrown out and what must be kept. It does not ponder over it; it simply knows. Maybe there is a psychological ecosystem too. Just like everything in nature has its place, perhaps every thought and emotion within us also has a purpose.

We often try to rid our minds of certain thoughts, but do not succeed in doing so. Maybe they remain because they are needed for some kind of inner change to take place. Life cannot stay still for long. It has to move.

Even when life seems stagnant, even when we feel stuck, perhaps life is quietly ‘packing’ and getting ready for a new ‘journey’.

We often forget this when it comes to children and their learning. We expect visible, measurable progress. We look for answers, accuracy and performance — as if the mind is a machine that must constantly produce more — but just like a room needs to breathe, learning needs openness. A child may be silent, may seem to be stuck while working, but something could be moving deep within her. The mind is not the only place where learning happens.

Every small thing, every fleeting thought, every little emotion is more valuable than we often realize. Sometimes, this is beyond our understanding. And when the mind cannot understand something, it quickly labels it as being useless or calls it garbage. But we are not made only of the mind, and neither are children only their marks, their handwriting, their speed. A slow child is not dull, nor is a distracted child mentally weak. Maybe they are looking for a way to breathe.

We often give too much importance to the mind. We think it is the most important part of us because it helps us to reason, question, deal with worries, and figure things out. But this is only a part of what every individual does...what about the rest of our being? What about the silent movements inside? What about the psychological ecosystem we are carrying within ourselves?

Sometimes a child who is struggling with a concept just needs space, not more pressure. What seems like resistance may only be mental fatigue. What we call indiscipline may actually be a silent cry for connection. However, we rush in to try and fix a problem, explain away a difficulty and control the situation. We forget to wait; forget that not all flowers bloom in spring. Some bloom late; some bloom unseen. Each one has its own rhythm.

In a school too, we need rooms that breathe—spaces where children’s ideas can unfold at their own pace. Not everything needs to be loud or visible, nor does all learning need to be accounted for, evaluated. Some parts of it are like compost—quietly decaying, but also quietly creating a nourishing mixture. It may look like nothing is happening, but something deep and essential is taking place.

We are used to achieving outcomes and being evaluated—so much so that we forget how the inner world of a child works. We forget to ask how

a child feels while learning or find out what is going on in the child's mind. What thoughts are building quietly inside? Learning is not always linear. It is like a sailboat, sometimes moving fast, sometimes slow, sometimes without direction—but always moving, even when still.

I feel we teachers are playing a part in something that is much bigger than we are aware of. Although we cannot see the whole picture, our small actions and emotions are not meaningless. We are shaping something larger that is still beyond our sight, but we also cannot see it because we are inside it ourselves. We do not have separate trajectories from our students and their parents. We are shaping others and being shaped at the same time.

Everything is happening because it has to happen. Life takes its own course—through right and wrong, through knowing and not knowing. We will keep asking questions, keep trying to find answers, because that too is part of the journey. But things will come and go through us. A concept that made no sense yesterday may suddenly become clear tomorrow. A student who struggled all year may surprise us one fine day. And even if they don't, they are still moving. Something inside them is moving. We are not stuck; we are sailing.

And in this journey, we must remember that education is not only about shaping the mind—it is about shaping the being. It is not about knowing everything, but about remaining open to new experiences, open to reflection and open to transformation. The role of a teacher or a parent is not to push the boat forward but to help create the conditions in which the sails of the boat can find the wind. Not every breeze is visible, not every current is understood, but the journey goes on.

So let the child—and yourself—breathe. Let the room be open. Let learning unfold.



When Things Don't Fit in Neat Boxes

SHIKHA DUTT



Most learning in school fits into neat little boxes—boxes for subjects, timetables, learning objectives and outcomes. A label says: ‘learning happened in bounded slots, assigned to subjects, moved toward outcomes’. Mathematics from 9.00 am to 10.00 am. Science from 10.00 am to 11.00 am. Even art and music get boxes—bounded, assessed, concluded.

But perhaps there is a learning that is far more essential than what these boxes can contain, and which we, in our preoccupation with boxes, are slowly making invisible. An intelligence that unfolds not only in the mind, but in the body’s real-time conversation with the physical world—an intelligence that is of the whole.

Observations on play

There has to be a quality of spontaneity. That is, you have to discover yourself anew, see yourself as something that is changing all the time. If you can observe it, see it spontaneously, then the mechanistic process of memory has very little significance.

Krishnamurti in Benares, 1963, Talk 2

Every child gets two square pieces of paper: one black, the other white. They must create a composition using the two pieces of paper and a pair of scissors, without adding to or subtracting anything from what they have and applying the basic principle of reflection symmetry. The child cuts a square, and the paper responds. A shape emerges—and immediately, it creates a new condition. There is a negative space now, and a positive one. The next cut needs to respond to both. The composition is unfolding in real time, and the child is completely present to it—not planning, not executing, *but observing and responding with complete attention.*

The child's being is completely involved—her hands, eyes and mind judging the results for the felt sense of beauty, proportion and harmony. And here is something worth thinking about—every child has an innate sense of aesthetics. An ability to sense if something is balanced, or not quite so. The ability to decide if a composition is complete, or still needs something. This cannot be taught; it appears to be in some meaningful way, biological—a capacity for perception that we carry within us even before anyone has named it for us.

The same dynamic is present in the process of tinkering. A group of children are engrossed in working together on building a 'marble run' out of paper: the marble is rolled through an elaborate network of paper ramps, loops and curves, gathering just the right amount of momentum to sail through the air, and land in a paper cup placed at a distance. It is an irresistible challenge! The children do not see the experiment as a physics lesson. In fact, it is blissfully devoid of jargon and definitions. They are observing how structures made with paper affect the trajectory of the marble, how the weight of the marble responds to the various forms, and how small changes produce disproportionate effects.

They have an intuition, test their ideas, watch what happens, and start again. Their body is involved in lifting, adjusting and sensing, and crucially, the paper structure and the marble talk back. The environment is not a passive backdrop. It is a co-creator of understanding. The child is learning how to converse with the physical world, and learning and responding in real time—they are *sensing their way* through observation and tinkering. As in the case of the paper composition exercise, there is no single way of creating a perfect marble run — no single way of doing things. Each child observes and responds to what they observe using his or her innate intelligence. They sense their way through the exercise, interacting with body, material and environment, responding to things as they unfold, without the pressure of a defined outcome. They play!

When there is no goal, no evaluation and no correct answer, the individual feels free to explore and play. The child with the paper and scissors is in fact playing, and so is the child with the marble run. Play is not the opposite of serious learning; it may be the original form of it. Play, which has a quality of spontaneity and is not based on accumulated ideas, is where the capacity for learning first appears and where it is most naturally sustained. But do we see play as the flowering of intelligence?

As an educator, I find myself wondering about what our preoccupation with ticking neat little boxes is doing to the flowering of intelligence in a child. While this type of education does not suppress intelligence, it never calls upon the innate creativity that we all have as human beings, letting it quietly atrophy instead.

What the body knows

But if one observes, one will see that the body has its own intelligence; it requires a great deal of intelligence to observe the intelligence of the body.

J Krishnamurti

Before coming to the Krishnamurti schools as a young parent, my work as a design school graduate helped me interact closely with artisan communities in various parts of India for over a decade. It was an education far richer than any I had ever received in a classroom. There was much to be learnt from just observing an altogether different kind of intelligence at work in these communities—an intelligence that my own education had barely touched upon.

Most master artisans—weavers, potters, carpenters, metalworkers—do not begin with a detailed plan. They begin with material, and they respond to it. A weaver does not draw a pattern and then execute it; the pattern emerges through his accumulated knowledge of thread, tension and rhythm. A potter reads the clay—its moisture, its resistance—and adjusts the pressure of his shaping fingers in fractions of a second. This is not the result of using intuition but rather expertise—built through thousands of hours of embodied interaction with a medium—and it lives as much in the body as in the mind.

The philosopher Michael Polanyi called this ‘tacit knowledge’—we know more than we can say. But it goes further than that: this knowledge cannot be fully shared with others because it is not stored in the kind of propositional format that language can retrieve. It is stored in gesture, muscle memory, and the body’s learned capacity to perceive and respond. You cannot learn to ‘throw’ a pot only by reading about how to use a potter’s wheel. The knowledge only becomes available to your intelligence through your body’s repeated encounter with clay.

Yet, this ‘embodied intelligence’ is not just about body and material in isolation. It is a triangle: body, material and environment in continuous

interaction. This is visible in how indigenous knowledge systems are structured—not as bodies of abstract principle, but as accumulated wisdom built through a sustained, attentive relationship with a specific environment. The farmer reads the soil; the fisherman reads the water: this is not folk wisdom but a sophisticated epistemic practice in which the environment is seen as an active participant in the process of knowing.

Schools, however, despite their best intentions do not leave room for the flowering of this kind of intelligence. They continue to function largely on a different premise: that the mind is the seat of learning, that the body is a more or less incidental vehicle for the mind, and that knowledge is something that can be stated, tested and recorded.

What makes us human

So what is the difference between the human brain and the computer? There isn't any. I wonder if you see this. If a machine can do it, and the human brain can do it too, there is not much difference. But the human brain has some other quality: to find out what intelligence is. If the computer can do what the human brain can do, then we are not intelligent. There must be a quality of intelligence which only we can find out.

Krishnamurti in Madras, 1980, Talk 2

In recent times, there has been a growing argument for greater hands-on learning in schools. A case is made for more art education, for 'maker' spaces, for project-based learning, and for integrating the 'head, heart and hands'. Those arguments have their place, but there is something far more urgent in the current moment that goes beyond pedagogy.

As Artificial Intelligence becomes capable of performing more and more complex cognitive tasks—pattern recognition, analysis, synthesis, even generation of text and image—there is the genuinely pressing question of what remains distinctly human. The answer that we arrive at too soon is 'creativity', and yet, AI generates, composes and designs materials too. The more specific and defensible answer is an altogether different capacity—embodied intelligence.

AI does not have a body. It does not have proprioception—the felt sense of where the body is in space, how a material resists or yields, what it feels like when something is about to break. It cannot be surprised by clay. It cannot feel the moment when a composition resolves. It processes

representations of the physical world, but it cannot inhabit it. The kind of intelligence that emerges from the body's real-time interaction with material and environment is not something that can be replicated, because reading data is not the same as having an experience. Perhaps as educators we need to look more closely at what Krishnamurti was pointing out more than four decades ago: what makes us human, what intelligence is, and what kind of education might allow for the flowering of intelligence.

Hard questions

There are forms of learning that may genuinely need ticked boxes—that is, structure, sequence, and explicit instruction. But alongside it, or perhaps beneath it, education also needs something harder to name and still harder to defend; something that flowers spontaneously from the alchemy of the whole experience. It is far more subtle and nebulous, and resides in the realm of uncertainty, ambiguity and the unknown.

With the whole process of schooling so focused on regurgitating knowledge, 'not knowing' can seem almost an act of rebellion in learning and teaching. But are we as educators ready to step out of the neat little boxes that we have become so comfortable with to explore what sits outside them? Are we prepared to examine and inquire with an open mind, and remain open to changing our notions about education? Can we be open to an altogether different way of learning, where a child spends an afternoon playing and has nothing to show for it afterwards, and still accept this as learning? Can we accept that a teacher's role may not be to instruct, but to provide suitable conditions and then get out of the way? Can we see that the natural flowering of observation, attention, care, and stimulating the innate sense of intelligence are ends in themselves—not just enrichment, but education!

Put away the book, the description, the tradition, the authority, and take the journey of self-discovery.

J. Krishnamurti, *Commentaries on Living*, Vol.3.



Meditation and Inquiry in the Field of Education

STEPHEN SMITH IN CONVERSATION WITH ALOK MATHUR



Steve: It seems to me, increasingly, that we are only touching the surface of our ever-mounting problems: the roots of our unhappiness lie much deeper. And nothing we are doing in the contemporary world—the prodigious advances in technology, for instance—does anything to alleviate—indeed, it exacerbates—the isolation both existential and immediate that hangs about us like a cloud. We have abdicated the field of education—what one might call *true* education—for measurement, averages, point scores and placings, leaving the vast terrain of the psyche untouched. What we need is access to this vast terrain, some tentative yet quietly balanced exploration of the hidden depths that control our behaviour. Without that, invent or expand as we will, we shall remain barbarians at heart, with a cultivated coating of knowledge and sophistication. Nor will our problems be solved by wealth, that ‘pot of gold beyond the sky’ which, materially or spiritually, everyone is looking for. We must turn inward to find true wealth—but how?

Alok: I deeply feel what you are pointing to. With the explosion of social media and more recently the seductive advance of Artificial Intelligence, we seem to be getting increasingly immersed in a self-generated technological space, and quite out of touch with actuality. This is a recipe for a highly fragmented relationship with the world...a sense of alienation from others, from nature, and from our own human nature. And it is evident that education, as it is conceived and largely practised today, has been captured by the frameworks of measurement and economic compulsions that you allude to. How can we even begin to circumvent these compulsions that so distort the psyche? Does this not demand a more mindful approach in schools, one that engages the different dimensions—biological, social, intellectual, emotional and much more—that makes us human?

Steve: There is much talk, and some implementation, of what is called ‘mindfulness’ in various schools, which seeks to calm the wandering mind and bring it back to a point of focus. In terms of *raja yoga*, it has been going on for centuries: take one strong thought and use it like a stick, to beat down and beat away any would-be intruder. Hold the fort! There may be other so-called meditative practices which are at times introduced. These may have some value as far as cleansing the mind is concerned, but they do little to heal the psychological rift between one part of the brain (the observer) and that other vast terrain (the observed). For, however far one travels with this paradigm, sooner or later it is revealed for what it is: inherently conflictual. There is no thought other than thought itself—no grander, finer Supermind. To bring it back to Krishnamurti, the observer *is* the observed. Absolutely.

Alok: You are jumping to an insight that is not at all evident to our everyday minds. Could you say something more?

Steve: This is not the description of a static state, for thought itself is constantly moving, but rather an indicator of its pliability and swiftness. And, as in any relationship, the onus is on us to get to know ‘the other’ (the observed) with its secret promptings of heart and mind. One cannot do this from a sit-back position: it requires what Sartre calls *engagement* (commitment). The stream of consciousness flows inevitably, and we learn nothing unless we immerse ourselves. Curiously, however, this ‘immersion from the bank’ is not an act of self-willed bravado but, if anything, one of ‘let’s wait and see’ as, tentatively, one explores the depths. Iridescences are here, little miracles for the taking, as the cloud of obscurity gradually lifts and we find ourselves in a different world or, rather, the same world at a different level of perception. The dreadful monochrome cast is thrown and what is left is *what is* in all its splendour. The firm, beautiful body of the world is starkly revealed in its nakedness. There is a sense of the infinite . . . the beginning of meditation.

Alok: Is ‘meditation’ something one might touch through such an exploratory engagement? Clearly, it is not something like a daily practice or a technique to be taught.

Steve: It is not something one strives for but is given to one, as it were, ‘on a plate’. It is not the fruit of one’s endeavours, however well-intentioned they may have been. It is, as the German philosopher puts it, *in Ding an*

sich: something by, for and in itself. It is non-comparative, and it has no equal. And yet, it is an Open Field.

Alok: Are you suggesting that the psyche may reveal its depths when ‘you’ are not pushing at anything, not striving in any direction? Does the psyche, that is our consciousness, then have space for ‘getting to know itself’? Perhaps in letting go of the surface layers of thinking one senses deeper connections within oneself, and with the world *as it is*, and not as something apprehended or filtered through concepts or mental models. Would you say this is the preserve of a few mature and sensitive adult minds? Or can anyone—I am thinking of a teacher in a school, or for that matter, even a young child—come upon this movement...or non-movement? I do believe that many children, when they are very young, are alive to the world in qualitatively different ways from most adults: they perhaps relate to things much less through the layered thinking of the intellect and more through bodily senses and unspoken intuitions. And yet, could older people too, along with the young, have a feeling of this ‘immersion’, of awakened senses and inward knowing? Are you, in fact, suggesting that this form of engagement with an ‘open field’ is something that education needs to be concerned with?

Steve: The field of education has been impoverished because, too quickly, we have put blinkers on it: we *know* where we are going, and that is the problem. The categories of knowledge inherited from the Greeks allow us to work assiduously—to experiment, to invent, to discover and have insights—but they lack a deeper coherence, what David Bohm, presumably, was searching for when he wrote and talked about *the implicate order*. It is something at once whole and not of separate parts; indeed, nothing exists outside of it. From the tiniest particle to every living being, to the most monolithic structure, it accounts for everything—without being accountable! Both the *is* and the *is not* of existence. It defies definition: it is the Whole in action. The swiftness of perception, when the observer *is* the observed, allows for no half-measures, no backsliding. It is like a precious jewel, given in trust. One cannot—indeed, one dare not—hand it back.

Alok: You’ve said a lot there and I wonder if I am getting something of what you are alluding to... Let me try and put it in my own words: over the centuries our intellectual heritage, deriving from the Greeks as well as other traditions, has parsed the world and our human existence into categories and concepts. This has allowed us to increasingly gather

knowledge of different sorts, and we feel compelled to pass on some of this to our children; but this essentially separates us from a deeper living reality. All our endeavours collude to maintain this separation, self-created 'observers' confined within our self-generated mental mappings. You are suggesting that the universe, including all that lies therein, may in truth be an unbroken wholeness... to which it is our deeper human calling to respond. Instead, we are moving further into our own techno-bubbles. And yet, if this separation were to be dissolved—one really doesn't know how—there is no going back! Are you saying that this would bring a complete shift in perspective, in the meaning of life itself? But what has all this got to do with learning, with education as it might be approached?

Steve: Well, quite simply, everything! It is not that we should try to align it with our categories, well-intentioned as they are, for this is the moment of true revolution, when the Old Order is broken and a new one shoots forth. There is no way one can put the 'new seeing' back in place, like putting the genie back in the bottle, for the genie is screaming to be watered. In other words, what is being challenged is the nature of the 'seeing mind' itself. We have taken it for one thing and now we find it is another. Can one live with such a mute mutation? Can one live with its many implications?

Alok: Are you suggesting that such a 'true education' might enable a 'mutation' in our very being? Here, I am totally stumped! ... But to begin to think it out as a possibility: as a starting point I visualize an educational space, a school, in which adults are not simply out to impress their worldview or their inherited categories of knowledge and prejudices on the young. They encourage children to relate to and learn about the world using their perceptual faculties: observing, listening, sensing, feeling, doing... which means being in contact with soil, rocks, plants, insects, birds, and other life forms. And, to the extent possible, in this more direct way, with people and the built environment that makes up their surround. However, we cannot deny that language and symbol systems are as much a part of our human culture. And the push towards literacy, numeracy and various forms of knowledge are an inevitable necessity for engaging with the complex environments that we have constructed. I wonder whether it is possible for our senses to remain open, quietly attentive to things as they are? Can we learn to relate with others and with the natural world with a certain simplicity, a certain openness?

But, Steve, just to invoke the huge challenge in all of this: children also come with their own early conditioning and, as they grow older, the

pressure of social relationships and the need for belonging to some group or the other, to have some kind of identity, seems to become paramount. This is accompanied by the rapid accretion of the layered and constructed 'self', which, while identifying with some, separates us from others. The approach of adolescence often triggers an even greater rise and fall of emotions—there are the reactions of pleasure and pain, with their contradictions and confusions. These factors may very well continue in some form through one's life. The 'self', assuming multiple identities, rides on the surface wave of time, with its past, present and future preoccupations, and this occludes what might have been the relatively innocent perceptions of childhood. The unknown depths of our being remain obscured. I think this is where the greatest challenge lies for the psyche. What are the young or the old to do with this compulsive movement that has its own momentum?

Steve: What if the confusion we live with daily were *not just mine*, or mine alone, but the manifestation of a universal phenomenon, something we all share in, part of the Stream? Would that not make a whole lot of difference? Seen this way, our own personal neuroses would be seen not as some local aberration, but as arising from a universal current, the 'stream of consciousness' we call ourselves. Here, surely, is a richer source; here we might with uncluttered vision find the origin of what men call *sin*, the missed mark, the grievous fault embedded.

Alok: I think I see what you mean... you are suggesting that our so-called individual 'streams of thinking' continually arise from and contribute to that hugely aggregated phenomenon that is the 'collective stream' with all its content. This manifests as the fragmented and divided world that each of us experiences. Paying attention to this 'stream of thinking' that shapes us must then be a vital aspect of education. The teacher and student are both in it. Even as we relate with each other, if there are occasions for bringing this stuff of our inner lives to the surface, we may begin to uncover its contours. This could perhaps happen in an atmosphere of affection and care—in conversation, in sharing, questioning, listening, observing, feeling each other out. In moments of quietness, we do become aware of our responses and reactions. If we are sensitive, we may notice that others too have these inner movements. Rather than quickly categorizing emotions and behaviour into 'good' and 'bad', 'pleasurable' or 'painful', we may learn to pay attention to these movements of thought-feeling and sense that others too are subject to desire, pleasure, envy, anger, and fear in its various forms. This lessens the sense of isolation and separation.

It could also awaken empathy and give room to look anew at oneself and others.

Could we then also tentatively probe the shared roots of what you call 'sin'? I now sense that this so-called 'original sin' in our psyche arises from this split between the 'observer' and the 'observed'. I wonder what makes possible the 'uncluttered vision' that is necessary to even begin to *sense* this split? Being mindful of our 'stream of thoughts' by itself is not sufficient. It begs the question: 'who' is it that is 'being mindful' and of 'what'? And with what impulse? It brings us back to the 'observer' and the 'observed'. I wonder, what then is 'meditation'?

Steve: Mindfulness is a palliative, meditation a revolutionary event. Meditation is not an outcome; it is not in a posture nor is it a reward. It doesn't depend on Time at all. Nor, strictly speaking, is it anything one can practise. It comes upon one, bursting forth, the fruit of many hours of close observation. No amount of talking will do it, nor will breath withheld, nor chanting of a mantra. For 'the work' takes place in the minutiae, in the detail, in the patient watching, hours by hours. Only thus can we build the necessary stamina to take us through the inevitable 'hard times.' In a sense, it isn't something one *does* at all, but rather something that comes to one, that drifts in on the wind when the window is open.

Alok: So, it is not contingent on introducing some forms of 'mindfulness' practices, or ensuring some leisure during the day, or even a time for dialogue, however beneficial these might be. What is needed is to let this seed of 'inward looking' take root...allow it to be nourished whenever and in whatever way possible, in 'hard times' and 'easy times.' If there are some non-directed, natural spaces for teachers and students to simply be attentive during the waking hours, could it not be that something else happens—without premeditation, unexpectedly. Could this open up a silent space beyond the stream of thinking, allowing in a fresh breeze that heals this primordial split and awakens a feeling of renewal? Perhaps this might happen—at least for some—during occasions such as the evening gathering atop a hillside that we used to call 'asthachal'.

Steve: It happens whether one wants it or not and, in this sense, it is totally impersonal. The circumstances may be replicated, but this will not bring about the sought-for breakthrough. Nothing that is sought-for will. The flower bursts through in its own way, in its own time, and that is its beauty.

It is an organic process from first to last. The Journey ends where it begins—with oneself.

Alok: But does this mean that watering the soil of inward looking, of observing the self-movement, is the only key, and that there is no role for study and inquiry, for probing our inherited knowledge and our human condition? One could very well ask: what is the purpose of the school curriculum, of teaching and learning in classrooms, which takes up so much of our time and effort?

Steve: To speak of inquiry in this context may seem spurious, too much part of the ‘movement of measure’, which we are trying to replace with something more holistic. But, seen another way, it is part of the Journey, a necessary, articulated putting-into-place. For our disorderly minds certainly need a houseclean; there needs to be order in the realm of thought. Logical, coherent thinking is required, as also close examination of our convictions, quirks and foibles, before an accurate picture—and it is but a picture—can come to present ourselves to ourselves. In this sense, the reflected light (*chidhabasa*) must be turned on and functioning properly. As K said frequently, ‘We must put the house in order.’

Alok: Here, I feel that engagement with knowledge needs to be given its proper place. Not just the accumulation and regurgitation of received subject knowledge, but more an inquiring approach, an engagement with concrete realities as well as wider human perspectives. This develops a capacity to question, uncover assumptions, form connections, apprehend the big ideas and logic of the disciplines, and relate these with oneself and the phenomenal world. This surely builds some intellectual ‘muscle’ and clarity, a capacity to think logically, coherently, as well as intuitively. This could be applied not only to apprehending and solving the messy problems of the world, but to one’s inner life as well. One’s inner life is often full of beliefs, assumptions, biases and contradictions, and to be able to examine these and clear up at least some of the mess the intellect must be an aid in self-understanding. This, I feel, would help in some measure with an inner sense of ‘order’.

Steve: Ultimately, this is a task that no one can do for us. And, if we stumble, we must pick ourselves up. There is no help anywhere—except in ourselves.

Alok: Isn’t this ‘stumbling’ too a part of our human condition? For in our everyday lives and relationships, we are subject to a plethora of influences,

pressures, choices...divisive factors that arise and evoke reactions from within. The 'self' seeking its own security tends to channel energy within narrow grooves, with its conflicts and contradictions, ever pushing us 'out of sync' with the Whole. While the 'self' remains tenaciously in operation, can we ever deeply feel our own limitation, our self-created boundaries? To many of us there might seem to be no way out.

Steve: This does not mean it is a lost cause. Ultimately, it is a matter of maturation: what begins as a seed is bound to grow. Even at the level of thought, this is true. The universe is engaged in an expanding trajectory and, similarly, our minds are bent on expansion, which is one—but not the only—explanation of striving for *the more*. We want more—financially, societally—and our minds travel in pursuit of these goals. It is the same with non-material objectives, getting to the top of 'the pile', being the master of note or paint. They are all driven from below. And spiritual goals are no different: the search for a position of superiority is what drives many to seek 'the top'.

Alok: The self's urge for expansion is, of course, behind this striving for material, intellectual or spiritual wealth. This inevitably takes us out on a limb, distorting the psyche. To become acutely aware of these pitfalls, and sidestep them, would that not be the act of an awakening intelligence? Much of what we have said so far suggests that education, when it touches deeper layers of the psyche, prepares the ground for being able to help ourselves skirt this tendency, even as we traverse the inevitable seesaw of our lives. It needs intelligence to allow that seed of inward knowing to deepen its roots in the darkness and stretch towards light. Perhaps the seed might blossom as 'insight' into the essentially 'empty' nature of the self.

Steve: These are not necessarily insights but the fruit of clear thinking, which can and must be cultivated; otherwise, our inquiry is lopsided and the balance we spoke about earlier is missing. For the universe, as Professor Carlo Rovelli has pointed out, is fundamentally *about* relationship: it begins and ends with relationship. The subtle realm of quantum physics is increasingly underlining this fundamental feature of the universe. Strange, then, if on the way—obscurely, darkly, one must say—it ran out of relationship with itself, which, incidentally, human consciousness seems to have done. What a tragedy would be there!

Alok: What you are saying is that the imperative of 'true education' is to respond to this tragedy as it unfolds on our Earthly realm. Not only is this

needed to discover our deeper relationship with each other, with nature, but it also urgently points to the way the universe seeks to restore harmony with itself. The possibility of coming upon ‘true meditation—where the ‘observer’ is the ‘observed’—would be integral to this.

Steve: Harmony is the balance of all the parts equally. Nothing is extraneous, everything coheres. This is so, right down to the tiniest particle. There is order where there is no ‘self’, when all its devious twisting and turnings have worked themselves out and there’s nowhere else to go. For where there is *nothing*, there is *everything*.

Alok: Thank you, Steve, for this conversation. I hold these jewels of clarity close to the heart. May these shine through and find expression in the field of education. And may coming upon this field of ‘nothing’ that is ‘everything’ bring the possibility of harmony and grace to our human lives.



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A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

—Albert Einstein

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