

JOURNAL OF THE KRISHNAMURTI SCHOOLS

No 28, 2025

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 experience, curriculum, nature and environment, and contemporary issues. It lays a special emphasis on J Krishnamurti's principles of education, and will be of use to teachers, parents, educational administrators, teacher-educators, and anyone interested in education.

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PURCHASE DETAILS

Within India: Rs.150. May be remitted by DD or Cheque in favour of Krishnamurti Foundation India, payable at Chennai.
(For outstation cheques please add Rs. 40 towards Bank Charges)
Outside India US\$5 by Bank Draft in favour of Krishnamurti Foundation India or by Pay Order.
You may also order a copy online at kfionline.org

PUBLISHED ANNUALLY BY:

Krishnamurti Foundation India
124–126, Greenways Road,
RA Puram,
Chennai - 600 028
Email: info@kfionline.org
Website: www.journal.kfi.org

**Please note: The Journal of Krishnamurti Schools No 29
will be published in mid-2026.**

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

EDUCATING TO BE WHOLE

How would you, if you had a son here or a daughter, you want to educate them, or bring about a holistic life? You've got so many students here, capable, intelligent—at least some of them—and would you bring about, through what means, through what kind of attitude, what kind of verbal explanation, would you go through to educate a holistic way of living? That is what I am proposing. I mean by 'holistic' whole, unbroken, not splintered up, not fragmented, as most of our lives are. So, my question is, if I may put it to you: what would you do, in what manner would you educate, how do you bring about a holistic way of living? An outlook that's not fragmented in specialisations. How would you help them, or educate them to bring this about? Is this too complicated a question?

...I happen to...like the place, the beauty of the place, the hills, the rocks, the flowers, the shadows on the hills. I like the place. And I am one of the educators here; parents send me one of their children and I want to see that their whole life from the very beginning of their days, while they come here, I want to see that they live a life [that is whole] ... 'whole' means 'good'. Good, not in the ordinary sense of that word 'good'. It has a special meaning, not the old traditional word 'good'; a 'good boy', a 'good husband'—that's all very limited, in the verbal sense. But it has much greater significance when you relate goodness to wholeness. I don't know if I am making any sense. Good has that quality of being extraordinarily generous; good has that sense of not wanting to hurt another, consciously—you may do it unconsciously, but the whole attitude towards life, not to hurt, not to do something unkind consciously, [though] you may say something unconsciously. Good, in the sense that it is correct—not only for the moment; correct all the time...Correct in the sense it doesn't depend on circumstances—if it is correct now, it will be correct a hundred years later or ten days later. Correctness, which is connected with goodness, is not related to environment, circumstances, pressures and so on. So, from that comes right action. I don't know if you are following what I am talking about.

So, goodness and holistic way of living go together. And I am one of the... educators here, this gentleman sends his son to this school. In what manner am I going to see that the boy grows in goodness and a holistic way of living? That's my question. Do we rely on each other? Is it an

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individual problem or is it the problem of the whole school, of the whole body? So, it must be a comprehensive [approach]—not that gentleman thinks one way and I think one way about goodness. It must be a cohesive action. Right? Now, is that possible? And do you want that? Sir, please, in the word ‘holistic’ is implied not the orthodox, organized and all that stupid nonsense, but that quality of religion...So, how am I, living here as an educator, to bring this about?

...I want to find out what way I can help the student. I may not be holistic. You understand? Don't say you must first be holistic and then you can teach. Then we are dead.

I am responsible to the parents of that boy or girl. Right? They have sent them because we have a good reputation, we look after them, we do all that. That's not the point. He comes along and tells me, ‘It's all right, but what matters is a holistic way of life’. Not intellectual, but the whole psyche, the whole being, the whole entity, which is now fragmented, if that can be whole then you have done the most extraordinary education—he tells me that. And he goes away, and I don't know what to do. I understand the verbal meaning of whole, non-fragmented, not broken up, not saying one thing and doing something else, thinking something and doing quite the opposite to that. All that is fragmentation of life. And I don't know what to do. I really mean deeply, profoundly, gravely, seriously I don't know what to do. Right? Am I deceiving myself when I say, ‘I don't know what to do’, or waiting for somebody to tell me or some book, something [that] will accidentally come along and give me...insight. So, I can't wait for that because the boy is growing up in the meantime, kicking around.

So, what shall I do? I know one thing, absolutely for certain—I don't know. Right? I don't know. All my inventions, all my thinking, have collapsed. Right? I don't know if you feel that way. So, the brain is open for reception. You understand what I am saying? The brain has been closed—by conclusions, by opinions, by judgements, by values, by my problems—it's a closed thing. When I say I really don't know, I have broken something, I have broken the bottle which held the champagne. Out of that I begin to find out, when the bottle is broken. Right sir? Then I find out what love is, what is compassion and that intelligence that is born out of compassion. It has nothing to do with intellect. I'll work at it.

—From *Teachers Discussion 2*, Rishi Valley, 7th December 1985

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Editorial



Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ...

WB Yeats: *The Second Coming*

Living in the twenty-first century, one often feels that we have spiralled out of control. Yet, the human spirit is indomitable. It strives to make sense of that very chaos which whirls the world around. This is the spirit which seems to underpin many of the articles in this current *Journal*, whether one is talking about life or education or both. In contrast to this image of a storm which seems to uproot us all the time, there is also the metaphor of a river which flows along steadily. Krishnamurti often uses the river imagery:

The river is flowing steadily, deep and wide, but this pool is heavy with scum because it is not connected with the life of the river, and there are no fish in it. It is a stagnant pool, and the deep river, full of life and vitality, flows swiftly along.

—J Krishnamurti: *Think on These Things*

While one yearns for the centre to hold, there is also the fear of stagnation and the rot setting in. The first article by Shashidhar captures the essence of this conundrum in his article aptly titled ‘Flow of Meaning: Our house is in Disorder’. In what he alludes to as ‘the crisis of consciousness’, he urges us to examine alongside him the collective response to this crisis. He seamlessly explores how the collective response could be tied in with the individual response and cautions against the falsity of bringing in a division between the two. He candidly examines the ideas that contain the seeds of this division. He looks at dialogue as an effective functional tool in an educational space or a community that lives and works together. He concludes:

Thanks to this ethos of dialogue, there are many times when we share ‘as one’ the same reality and meaning flows. And when this happens, there is a quality of relatedness without conflict; there is the joy in cooperation and a release of creative energy that is palpable to all.

The last pages of the *Journal* hold an interview article with Brian Jenkins, the founder of the Sholai School. With him we traverse his journey of how the school began—how this centre has held together under the teachers who have assisted the students in ‘deepening their perception of life and understanding the many self-centred ways in which we are creating religious, political and psychological divisions among human beings, destroying Nature and damaging the Planet’.

Other writers too have written about their journeys as they navigate the space of teaching and learning with its everyday crises and conflicts. However, amidst this day-to-day business of steering this space, they are also aware of a different kind of creative energy which makes them seek deeper truths and make meaning of life. In a subtle way, the reverse is also true. They seem to have begun with certainties but somewhere along the way they begin to question the basis of these concretely held beliefs. It reminds one of a tiny poem by Richard Edwards:

*When I was three, I had a friend
Who asked me why bananas bend,
I told him why, but now I'm four
I'm not so sure¹*

From this tentativeness also, one could arrive at a truth of sorts. Vipula Mehta, in her article ‘You Don’t Need All the Answers! What it Means to Learn with Children’, feels liberated as she acknowledges a growing comfort with uncertainty and allowing conversations to ‘flow’ without a destination in mind. Kalpana Sharma on the other hand begins her journey with a ‘sense of space of flow in the buildings’ in Rajghat School. She asks the quintessential question of ‘What role can a space offer in facilitating the process of learning and flowering, in fostering creativity and curiosity?’ In her article, ‘Inclusive Spaces and an Alternative Curriculum’, she looks into the core of an inclusive curriculum which revolves around all the three—the head, heart and hands.

When Jenner muses: ‘The vivid, colourful ideas in my head seemed to fade into dull shades of grey the moment they left my mouth’,

it strongly evokes Noam Chomsky's phenomenal words 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'. Like stones set in a piece of exquisite jewellery, we have four articles which look into the visible and not so visible process of thinking. Meredy Benson's article 'Visible Thinking: Systems Thinking as a Teaching Strategy' works on the premise that much of our thinking stays in our head and we articulate only a fraction of it. By making visible that mode of thinking, she tries to make connections between and among those thoughts; thereby leading us to question thinking and understand it more deeply. By seeking links between one's own thought processes and that of others, she shares some valuable teaching tools in an approach she terms as 'systems thinking'. Jenner on the other hand begins his article, 'Are we Slaves to Language?' on a similar premise and tries to examine it through the lens of evolutionary biology. His approach is however more to understand and quell the questions that arise and understand the deeper process of thinking when expressed as language rather than any pedagogic process. In 'Growth Mindset in a Math Culture', Serra Benson values deep thinking, brain plasticity and the belief in one's ability to learn. In what she terms a transformative shift in teaching mathematics her focus is on sharing strategies rather than speeding towards solutions. For Kavitha 'learning a language' is unravelling several layers of fragrant memories. In appreciating the beauty in a language, one also understands human life at large. She goes on to highlight the differences and commonalities in learning a first and a second language.

In a total shift of gears, Sanjay Mathur poses hard hitting questions in his article, 'Teaching History and Civics in Challenging Times'. He questions as to what happens when students are non-inclusive and do not 'flower in goodness'. He works on the premise that 'sensitive topics require sensitive and respectful discussions'. He urges that one must raise good questions, seek facts, understand different points of view and not take sides. With richly illustrated live examples, he tackles these questions head on and urges teachers to be cognizant and self-aware of their own predilections, even as they nurture the spirit of critical enquiry in their students.

A different kind of reality is challenged in Srinivas's 'The Obsessive Pursuit of Success' and Prathima's 'What are we Doing to Our Children?' As Srinivas succinctly puts it: 'The constant struggle of the self in pursuit of fulfilment or success often causes conflict between what (or where) one is and what (or where) one wants to be.' Prathima bemoans the loss of

students' voices in the various scenarios she paints, of a world where the watchword is academic achievement, even as she cautions parents against succumbing to and transferring this pressure onto their children.

Based on her six years' experience, Priyanka Soman traces her journey as a teacher and discovers how teaching middle schoolers is a two-way street. She speaks of the connectedness and mutual learning that a teacher experiences in their company. Kaavya Nag in 'The Wholeness of Things' embarks on a journey of discovering the wonder of the 'intricate threads that connect all life'. She muses on *Satvan*, the physical space in which children are growing a seed bank among other things. In yet another project-based learning approach, Soumya Das draws attention to a different kind of seed—*seed of an idea*. The initiative soon leads to a movement of *ignite, innovate, inspire*. Ajin Thomas and Tarun Suri too explain the process of designing and conducting their field study of a peri-urban area through an inter-disciplinary approach.

One can see how in all these studies, there is always an underlying schema to connect with ideas, nature, society or/and the self. Prabha Chaitanya sums it up beautifully in the opening lines of her article, 'Explorations into Learning and Living':

What enables learning? When there is a natural rhythm or flow to life there may be a conducive environment for learning. What then is a natural rhythm in the context of living our daily lives? A feeling of oneness, perhaps, along with a careful listening to the cues and subtle directions that nature and human interactions provide us.

She too uses the metaphor of 'flow' and unravels the natural flow that enables learning. She organically explores this through various strands listed here: free will, natural flow, hindrances to the flow, emergence of clarity, clarity to learning, learnings in an adult, learning in a child, the purpose of learning and so on, embedded within other larger questions.

We have a small separate section wherein some of the editors have reflected upon 'what it means to be whole'. These are four short pieces no more than five hundred words, each unique in its deliberation of this central question. In different ways they attempt to respond to Krishnamurti's challenge in the opening extract: '... what matters is a holistic way of life... not [just] intellectual, but the whole psyche, the whole being, the whole entity, which is now fragmented. These are intended to open up

conversations that seek to penetrate the inner landscape and eventually find expression in the outer world.

There are two very special stories about trees. Alka Singh and Rachana Pandey relate an incident woven around a protest by a group of new girl students in a college who question the cutting of an old neem tree which had become etched into their lives. The article is aptly titled 'Between the River and the Trees: An Ode to the College by the Riverside'. Rajasree's 'Tryst with the Banyan Tree' is a more intimate and personal account of a tree that speaks to her. She describes it as a magical and humbling moment. What is more humbling is the act of sharing such a precious moment with the readers.

In conclusion, it may be said that the storm that is wrought by the disorder in the world finally finds its quietude. That is what going through this *Journal* feels like:

I go among the trees and sit still.

All my stirring becomes quiet

Around me like circles of water...

Wendell Berry: *I Go Among Trees*²

Anantha Jyothi

April 2025

1 'When I was Three', poem by Richard Edwards.

2 'I Go Among Trees'. Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*, 2014.

Flow of Meaning

Our house is in disorder

SHASHIDHAR JAGADEESHAN*



Anyone who is aware of the state of the world will recognize that we are at a point in human history where we are facing unprecedented challenges. Wars are raging, some of which are genocidal in nature. The threat of nuclear war has become imminent with the advent of authoritarian regimes all over the world. Every day, we read about extreme weather events. The rate of biodiversity loss is alarming with serious implications to the well-being of the planet. Human society is deeply divided with social and economic inequality at an all-time high. At a personal level, individuals seem to experience a deep sense of alienation, and one is often reading distressing reports about increasing rates of anxiety and depression among youth.

Krishnamurti would perhaps perceive this as a crisis in consciousness, one that demands both individual and collective responses. There is a rising strong feeling among many that what we need, certainly this late in the game, are collective responses. Perhaps there is also a feeling that individual action is 'too little, too late'. But I believe, with Krishnamurti, that this division into the individual and the collective is a falsity.

In this article, I begin by exploring what a collective response entails and examine how the collective response is tied in with the individual response. I will then share our experience in CFL (Centre For Learning) of creating a learning community as a response to the challenges posed by the crisis and illustrate how educational spaces like schools provide an ideal setting to understand the interplay between the individual and the collective.

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The demand for unprecedented cooperation

It is very clear that the nature of the challenges confronting us require unprecedented, widespread cooperation. Human beings do cooperate: when we are confronted with natural disasters; when we are driven by fear, desire, greed or anger; when we can easily identify the ‘other’; when we share an ideology or a belief system. Shared ideas can be abstract: money, a nation state or moral imperatives. In contrast, sending humans into outer space, creating amazing pyramids and even waging a war are stark examples of large-scale cooperation driven by the forces mentioned above.

Clearly, some forms of cooperation are dangerous, causing suffering either in the immediate future or in the long term. But what is more obvious is a serious lack of cooperation. Each of us will recognize this lack of cooperation at multiple levels: in our daily relationships, in our homes and neighbourhoods, at work, at national and global levels.

So, what blocks cooperation? What is the issue with our current modes of cooperation? As we have seen earlier, except perhaps when there is an immediate danger in front of us, our cooperation is driven by ideas or emotions, which can bring us together, but can also at the same time, contain the seeds of division.

Ideas contain the seeds of division

Religious ideas and beliefs have often served as a basis to bring people together, but as can be seen from the splintering that soon happens within religions, ideas are bound to lead to interpretations and each interpretation leads to a new faction. Nations too could be seen as a way of bringing smaller tribes together for mutual benefit. But when people feel that their interest is not being met, they will demand that they secede and form their own new nation.

Even when people come together with good ideas for a ‘good cause’—what Freud called the ‘narcissism of small differences’—eventually their efforts become fragmented! On a smaller scale, we see many families unable to hold together despite deep emotional and biological bonds.

We may begin with very noble intentions, but our brains are conditioned to convert intent into *ideas*. We deeply believe in our ideas. They seem completely logical and coherent and we have no reason to doubt them. But they are ideas—by which I mean we hold our perceptions and concerns conceptually, in the form of words, pictures, emotions and

memories. More importantly, they are a part of our self and our identity. They have become part of the framework through which we experience the world. When our ideas are threatened, we viscerally experience a threat to our very being. Our instinct for self-protection kicks in and cooperation goes out of the window!

But without ideas, what is the ground from which we can cooperate? Krishnamurti suggests we begin by *exploring* our conditioning, rather than changing it, wishing it away or finding means to circumvent it. The ground for cooperation then lies in turning the light onto oneself. We are suggesting that true cooperation can happen only when there is an active understanding of our conditioning. This includes understanding the nature of thought (including emotions), the nature of ideology and beliefs, the process of identification, and the role played by a sense of a separate 'self'. What then is this art of exploring our conditioning, whether individually or collectively? I would like to suggest that this is what 'dialogue' can be.

The notion of dialogue

Dialogue as a form of communication and understanding has been a part of human consciousness from ancient times. The native Americans had a notion of dialogue which they termed the 'Circle of Discourse'. These were by nature non-hierarchical; all participants were equally respected and listening and speaking were equally important. In the Indian tradition, the word *Upanishad* means to 'sit near'. *Upanishads* are dialogues which discuss fundamental questions about life and existence. Of course, the most well-known dialogues are the Socratic dialogues. The idea here is that through a series of penetrating questions, participants reach a state of puzzlement, referred to in Greek as *Aporia*. Understanding then follows.

David Bohm, the late physicist and philosopher, explored the notion of dialogue extensively. He says:

Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing, dance or play together with little difficulty, but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute,

division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.

The word ‘dialogue’ derives from two roots: *dia* which means ‘through’ and *logos* which means ‘the word’, or more particularly, ‘the meaning of the word’. The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants. Any number of people can engage in Dialogue; one can even have a Dialogue with oneself...

— *Dialogue: A Proposal*, David Bohm¹

I like this description of dialogue, as a flow of meaning among and within participants. For me ‘meaning’ implies understanding and shared intent. Bohm explored the word ‘meaning’ a great deal, and he says for example, ‘You see, only meaning can arouse energy’. We, however, need to be cautious of the danger of *shared meaning* becoming another idea or conclusion. Shared meaning can also lead to the ideological traps I outlined at the start. Perhaps this is why Bohm spoke of ‘flow’, which suggests fluidity or a lack of rigidity.

Thinking together, seeing together

Krishnamurti seems to suggest that human beings are capable of ‘thinking together’ and ‘seeing together’. These are non-divisive acts at the heart of cooperation and non-fragmentary action:

Freedom is the essence of thinking together. You must be free from your concepts, prejudices, and so on. I too must be free, and we come together in this freedom. It means dropping all our conditioning. It implies complete attention without any past.²

— J Krishnamurti

‘Seeing together’ is distinctly different from common notions of dialogue, such as: everyone’s opinion counts, let’s agree to disagree, let’s vote, we must tolerate diverse views, let’s bring in multiple perspectives. All of these somehow retain the seeds of division—by working around or managing matters—and are therefore limited and potentially dangerous.

Dialogue is the essential tool to think and see together in a questioning and gently sceptical way. The act of seeing together happens when we have a common insight, which is not based on ideas and concepts. Seeing together has the capacity to distinguish the real from the false. In it there is an in-built feature of self-correction. Of course, there is the danger that what we have seen together, becomes part of knowledge and a further

template to act from. Again, the only safeguard against this seems an awareness of this danger and a renewed demand to see together without coming to any conclusion.

The collective response we need today is one that takes dialogue and cooperation of this different order. But is not collective response essentially a reflection of the individual's response?

The individual and society

One of Krishnamurti's key teachings is the statement 'You are the world'. I understand this to mean that human consciousness is one, and in understanding ourselves we understand all of humanity. The sense that we are separate individuals may be an illusion. This sense of separation makes us relate to the world from a self-centred perspective, which might be the most dangerous thing on earth.

Seeing the state of the world and of ourselves, it behoves each one of us to bring about a radical transformation within ourselves. One is not different from the society in which we live; the world is us, and we are the world. The division between the individual and the community, the 'me' and the 'you', the 'we' and 'they', has caused so much mischief in the world, so much misery and confusion. And any serious person—I do not mean by that an intellectual but one who is involved in the whole process of living—must bring about this transformation within himself, who is the human being. And this change cannot be brought about unless there is total freedom from conditioning.³

— J Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti clearly points out that society at large is the result of the relationship among its members. If the members function from a deep sense of division and are driven constantly by the urge for self-protection, then the society we create will reflect this. The individual and society mirror each other. The response to the current crisis demands that we as individuals be watchful about how our conditioning is operating, and from this watchfulness we think, see and act collectively. The watchfulness is not out of fear, judgment or effort. Can we come upon this watchfulness in our daily lives? Krishnamurti felt that education could be a space for this, and the key to the regeneration of society. After all, at the heart of any school lies the question: 'What kind of society do we wish to create and

live in?’ As a teacher in a Krishnamurti-inspired school (CFL), there has been ample opportunity to explore all these questions through dialogue.

What is essential to such an education?

Centre For Learning (CFL) is a teacher-run school inspired by the teachings of J Krishnamurti. It has a flat structure with no hierarchy among its teachers. The school exists to become aware of how conditioning of various kinds leads to division and explore whether it is possible to live and act from a ground of compassion rather than division.

Dialogue is central to the work of the school, but a certain culture has to be in place for that to happen. First and foremost, the relationship between teacher and student must be based on affection and mutual respect. We cannot use traditional motivators like fear, competition, reward and punishment. The intention of learning, rather than guaranteed outcomes, must be at the heart of everything we do.

In the teaching of various subjects, where the teacher is expected to ‘know more’, dialogue is the mode of communication. Here too, meaning must flow between teacher and the taught. For example, the teacher asks a question or makes a brief presentation. Then there is a free flow of conversation, and questioning is constantly encouraged. The role of the teacher as an authority figure is kept light and meaning is gradually built in a collaborative way.

Finally, a school is also a complex community of students, teachers and parents, all of whom must cooperate at many levels and over many things for the community to function smoothly. How do we cooperate without using fear and authority? For us, dialogue is the way! Since we recognize the need for all members of the CFL community to think together, a great deal of time and energy is set aside for dialogue.

The challenge of living and working together

I will share what I see as the demands on different members of a school, and then explain how dialogue can be ‘used’, perhaps ‘instrumentally’, to meet these.

Demands on the young:

- Do not intentionally hurt anyone.
- Respect common spaces and property.
- Respect agreed-upon times when we do things together. Follow norms

of behaviour that have been created together, especially in the areas of sexuality, substance abuse and safety.

- For older students: take active ownership in creating and maintaining the ethos of the school.

We must remember that there is an asymmetric power relation between adults and young people. Therefore, it is especially important to create a safe and democratic space where the voices of all participants are respected and heard. Apart from informal conversations which happen one-on-one, or in small groups, we have created semi-formal spaces to think together. For example, we have weekly dialogues, where teachers and students (even very young ones) sit together and discuss a variety of subjects. These may be problem solving sessions, but more often they are meant to understand our psychological landscapes and how to navigate them. We have meetings where adults and students who share a hostel meet regularly to question norms that are in place and to make sure that as a community, we do not swing between being conformist and being reactive. The attempt is to see if it is possible to function from a ground of understanding, rather than from mechanical rules and rebellion. Occasionally, the whole school meets to discuss common concerns. Here topics can range from plate washing to bullying.

Demands on parents:

- To work with the teacher body in understanding the philosophy of the school, so that the adults in a child's life are not pulling in different directions, and the engagement with the intentions are not seen as only teachers' work.
- To be alert to one's own fears, ambitions and aspirations so that these do not pass on to children, or end up distorting the work of the school.
- The school and home should not be at odds with each other in their relationship to discipline, learning, food, media and sleep.
- Can the parents and teachers explore what it means to help a child feel completely secure?

Semi-formal spaces have evolved for conversations with parents to explore the questions that are important in the school. These include a weekend orientation for new parents, teachers and parents meeting once a month, and an annual one-on-one meeting with each parent re-examining why we have come together.

Demands on teachers:

- Being teacher-run means being responsible for all aspects of the school, no-one plays the role of either a foot soldier or the general!
- Collective decision-making implies starting with the intent to cooperate from the very beginning, seeing the importance of ‘thinking together’.
- CFL is the result of the collective understanding of its members, so every member has to be proactive about maintaining the ethos of the school.

Once again dialogue is central to the teachers’ lives. We meet frequently, and each meeting is an opportunity to listen and think together. We have consciously set aside time fortnightly to explore fundamental questions without any agenda. New teachers have a separate space to discuss in a smaller group. Our annual teacher retreats are both spaces to ‘clean house’ and to go deeper into questions that animate us.

Our challenges:

Naturally, we have had our challenges along the way. What is humbling is that while our attempts described above make sense and are absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient in meeting the challenge of ‘awakening intelligence’.

For the students, alongside learning there is the creation of a learner. The learner, *to whom learning is happening*, seems separate from the learning. Thus, the student inevitably begins adding layers of information to their sense of self. They experience insecurities, comparisons, inadequacies and pride. A benign environment is not enough to avert all these self-related knots. Yet students may resist this process of dialogue and self-observation, feeling it is imposed from the outside.

With parents, we are working with the deep instinct to protect one’s own young. Here the dialogue is a process of exploring well-being for our children, a well-being that is inclusive in nature and which has compassion and sensitivity as its main pillars.

And to now turn the light onto ourselves, teachers. We are subject to all the forces I mentioned earlier! We convert intent into ideas all the time and must watch out for it. We experience both the pull of conformity and the pull of wanting to be different. Our images of each other, built up over time, prevent listening. Our emotions can overwhelm the conversation, and relationships may break under the force of our egos. In all these ways,

the flow of meaning is blocked. This is the challenge David Bohm posed: ‘...humans can sing, dance or play together with little difficulty, but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division and often to violence.’

CFL has put in enormous energy to create a cohesive and coherent learning community, trying to stay true to its intent. On a daily basis, we do what we do because it makes sense and there is really no other alternative if one is interested in responsible education. Thanks to this ethos of dialogue, there are many times when we share ‘as one’ the same reality and meaning flows. And when this happens, there is a quality of relatedness without conflict; there is the joy in cooperation and a release of creative energy that is palpable to all.

1 *Dialogue, A Proposal*, David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett, 1991
http://www.davidbohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html.

2 ‘The Whole Movement of Life is Learning’: J Krishnamurti’s *Letters to the Schools*, 2004

3 J Krishnamurti: Public Talk 2 in Amsterdam, 4 May 1969

You Don't Need All The Answers!

What it means to learn with children

VIPULA MEHTA*



I have often wondered what it truly means to learn with children: if it is about absorbing their experiences and delighting in the candour of their unfiltered utterances, if it is being open to the newness of their ideas, if it is about being fully present in their journeys, or if it is something a little more and a little personal perhaps?

I remember when I first started teaching, I was often frustrated by how there were sometimes no obvious solutions for conflicts. To my inherently mathematical brain, it just didn't make sense; I wanted clear answers. I wanted to know just what to say to a child who had brought chocolates to school, how to respond if a child asked me why something was not allowed, or how to redirect a conversation that didn't feel right. I remember often feeling uncomfortable about how unconvincing my responses sounded even to me. I did not know then that my discomfort was stemming from a desire

to appear sure and knowledgeable—a desire that had been fuelled through years of exposure to a system that valued information and surety above everything else.

I cannot recall when exactly 'I'm not sure!' and 'I don't know but we could look it up together!' slipped into my everyday vocabulary in class, but I do remember feeling liberated by this discovery that I did not need to have all the answers.

Something else I discovered almost magically over time was that, as long as I stayed with the questions long enough, the answers would begin to take shape in my head and start easing into conversations with children. With each passing year, I found myself responding to the same situation with a little more patience and a lot more understanding. My ability to deal with conflicts evolved over time too. 'You know it's not allowed!' gradually shifted to 'I understand but why

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do you think it's not ok to do this?' and sometimes in moments, when I really wanted to understand where children were coming from, it even took the form of a problem-solving exercise: 'What do you think will work?' Those discussions, where I may have facilitated a conversation but remained just a listener for the rest of it, remain some of my most favourite as a teacher!

I remember after a particularly frustrating landcare class, in which children had been completely distracted, I asked them what would make them work with more care and involvement the next time. The almost unanimous answer, though it took different forms in different voices, was that a reward would be the most efficient way to achieve this. So, I reminded children that as a space, we did not believe in rewards or punishments and that they would have to come up with something more creative than this. Not surprisingly, the question that followed was why not. Tempted as I was to share all my understanding of Krishnamurti's teachings with them, I remembered to pause and asked them to think about why rewards might not work. The answers left me surprised, coming as they were from ten-year-olds. One child expressed that if one group got more free time than the other, several children would get really upset. Another child felt that their entire focus would shift to the reward—which in this case was for the free time to begin—and that their involvement would actually suffer in the process. Still another

voice chimed in saying that it would stop working as a motivator after some time, because they'd want a little more free time in each landcare class. In that moment I realised that almost everything I had ever thought about rewards, and some more, was already right there in their little heads. I just had to remember to ask the right questions.

Almost ironically, the more convinced I became about some of these ideas, the more my ability to be tentative grew too, perhaps because it was a conviction that came from having stayed with something long enough, and tentativeness that came from knowing that there was still more to discover. What I'd viewed earlier as a lack of clarity became something else, an openness to what I had not learnt yet, along with a growing comfort with uncertainty. I began to be 'okay' with conversations not concluding the way I had intended them to go, sometimes even allowing them to flow without a destination in mind. If an answer was at odds with what I was trying to get at, it was still a welcome response. The more I gave students the space to share what they wanted to say instead of what I wanted to hear, the more clearly their distinct voices began to emerge. Occasionally, it even allowed me to see perspectives that I had not discovered in multiple readings of a book. During conversations in civics classes, discussions about freedom, justice and equality took on deeper hues

than I had anticipated, often forcing me to question biases I had not even thought I had.

As I saw myself changing and growing, I began to see children as a work in progress too. I learnt to be more patient with the changes they were going through. This is especially helpful in working with adolescents who are a new version of themselves every few weeks! In almost every situation in which they act uncharacteristically or even unkindly, it is useful to remember that it is often just a phase.

Another very precious thing that I discovered along the way is the ability to openly say 'I made a mistake!' One year, I had a particularly busy timetable on Mondays. The last class of the day was a combined circle time session in which I was often tired and impatient. During one such session, a child made a witty but slightly misplaced remark. On another day, I would have just smiled at it and moved on, but it threw me off a little then and I reacted quite sharply to it. This bothered me all evening, especially because there was nothing terribly wrong about what the child had said; I had just been too tired to see the humour in it. The next morning, I went in and apologized first thing. I saw blank faces in response. 'When did you get upset, aunty? We didn't notice, aunty. Are you sure it was yesterday, aunty? I smiled and said to them: 'This is the best thing about working with children; they forget easily.' There was more to come though. That year, I had fixed a day for assignments to

be submitted every week. This happened to be the same day. So, a few minutes after this exchange, I asked the children to turn in their work. I saw blank faces in response again. 'Which assignment, aunty? Are you sure it was due this Tuesday, aunty? Was it for English or Social Studies, aunty?' I smiled and thought to myself: this is also the worst thing about working with children; they remember nothing.

The interaction was a reminder for me that it is children's ability to be in the moment that allows them to be both as forgetful and as forgiving as they are. Through it, I learnt to be a little more forgiving too, to give them the same space to make mistakes as well. Conversations shifted from being about the mistake to understanding what had prevented them from doing something, or likewise had prompted them to do something else. We underestimate the power of kindness in the face of a mistake. Somehow, the more calm and respectful I am in addressing something, the more prompt children are in fixing it, almost as if they want to reciprocate that kindness. Not surprisingly, the effect often lasts longer too.

This is not to diminish the necessity of having to be firm sometimes, or to dismiss our responsibility as adults. Is it however possible to hold that responsibility without having to also assert my authority? Is it likewise possible for me to clearly express what I need to say, while still leaving

room for a child to question where I'm coming from?

The hardest and most rewarding conversations that I've had with students over the years are the ones in which I responded as an equal, where I was able to set aside the weight of my experience and expectations. Those conversations ceased to be about me and became about the children instead, about what they were going through in that moment. What I also discovered was that the more vulnerable I was in front of children, the more willing they were to open up and speak about their discomforts and fears. In those moments in which I was able to share my struggles with something, conversations came alive with more such stories. Likewise, when there was space for children to question me, and call me out on what I was doing wrong, is also when I learnt the most.

Some of this extended to my journey as a parent, too. Each time I grew a little as a teacher, I grew as a parent as well and each time my perspective shifted as a teacher or a parent, I know I grew a little as an individual too. If I look back at my journey of almost a decade as an educator, my experiences as an individual and as a parent seem to blend into one another, to the point of it becoming hard to distinguish one identity from the other.

This to me is perhaps the essence of learning with children: the understanding that we are all a work in progress, the comfort of not having all the answers but also knowing that one will get to them in time, the ability to admit one's mistakes and to be vulnerable, a shift from the affection we have in our hearts for children to something closer to respect, and working together to create a space that is free of fear.

Inclusive Spaces and an Alternative Curriculum

Practising inclusive education at Rajghat

KALPANA SHARMA*



A decade ago, when I stepped into Rajghat Besant School, I was awestruck by the vastness of the space. There was something very alluring about the campus. As I began my journey in teaching, many questions have arisen in my mind related to the ambience of the place. I often used to ask myself—what thought must have gone in building a space like this? Was it a conscious effort to exercise an ‘architectural psychology’, an effort to build up physical spaces which provide a sense of solace, and are conducive towards learning? The entire environment was inclusive and had such a positive impact on emotions, attitudes and behaviour. I could feel the shifts within, and it urged me to stay with this question—what role can a space offer in facilitating the process of learning and flowering, in fostering creativity and curiosity?

The welcoming assembly hall

Our Assembly Hall at Rajghat Besant School is a masterpiece. It resonates with the ambience of Shantiniketan, for it was designed by Shri Surendra Nath Kar, the architect of that hallowed institution. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore came to inaugurate it. The structure is vast and embraces one with a sense of positive energy. Generally, buildings have a frontal presence but this structure has a welcoming side at each end. The back side is closed and yet has a frontal presence as it faces the Ganga. The central hall is multifaceted. We not only have assemblies and gatherings here, but it also has four classrooms leading off from its corners. Students in primary school start their formal learning in this space. The openness itself speaks volumes, for there are no doors to the classrooms. Till date I don’t know the real reason behind it; but

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to me this feature is a symbol of inclusion, a perfect example of a barrier-free setting. The windows are broad and provide enough of an opening to soak in the lush nature which surrounds us: peacocks dancing, little squirrels running here and there among the ancient trees and the Ganga just a few steps away.

I find the classrooms very welcoming, as they convey a sense of space and flow. The approach is minimalistic. Children sit on straw mats with little colourful desks. They mostly sit in circles or semi circles, so that there is a constant flow of communication. Krishnamurti and Tagore have both placed nature at the centre of learning, and this can be witnessed at Rajghat. Having been here for a while now, I have felt deeply that this place embodies a certain cultural idea. Compassion and relationships are at its centre and the ambience radiates warmth all around. This is the most sacred place for me till now.

Once, during my BEd programme, a mentor had mentioned that if one really wants to learn about a school, one should closely look at the art work done by children. This is the best sign of the quality of learning happening in the school. These artworks can never be produced to a certain quality, by placing any specific demands. Here, all around, I saw phenomenal work on display. This was possible only because children felt safe, secure that their work will not be judged or criticised. It reflected a truly inclusive approach.

The junior school programme

My major reasons for joining a Krishnamurti school were for my own learning and to find the right learning environment for my five-year-old son who has special needs. Prior to joining this school, I was in touch with a few experts in the field, occupational therapists, special educators, psychologists, who had guided me in developing a learning environment for my son. However, once I started my journey here, I slowly started moving away from these 'outsourced methods' as nearly everything required was a part of the fabric of this school.

The core of the program revolves around all three—the head, heart and hands. Project-based learning with its rich interdisciplinary approach has its own merits. This enables one to build connections across subjects, augmenting conceptual understanding in various subjects. This also aids differentiated learning, giving each child an opportunity to assimilate things better and at their own pace. The art programme in the junior school is an integral part of the learning process. Most of the exercises which I used to do

for my son were all woven into the art programme here. Dance, music, *tabla*, craft, pottery, sports, all these provide joyous routes to expressing oneself. Overall, I have come to feel that we are sowing the seeds that promote socio-emotional learning, keeping in mind the neuroplasticity of the developing brain. Observation is the key chord, promoting attention, listening, seeing and feeling. Earlier I had been working on these aspects in isolation through a set of exercises for my son. But now I realized that all of this is embedded in the curriculum here and this has proven helpful for my son.

Meeting children's individuals learning needs

As the years progressed, I have been drawn to the approach of working with each child differently. Class discussions among the teachers of a particular set of children are an important platform for understanding each child. While working with children who have some special needs, we talk about an Individual Education Plan (or IEP). The way in which these class discussions flow, each child is discussed at length. The process shows that each teacher is very alert, for our evaluation is far from judging or classifying children according to a set of criteria. The subtle and unique aspect of each child is captured, and this has a tentative tone since the child is seen as a dynamic being. These meetings aim at not just sharing and listing out the flagged areas but also discussing, as an adult body, how can we together come closer to understanding the uniqueness of the child and figure ways to move forward with the child.

During a discussion among teachers about a particular class, we were once discussing a child who was not coping well academically and had frequent outbursts of anger. He was a socially withdrawn child. He was slow at writing and completing his school work. Most of his teachers had started feeling that he appears to be 'lazy', 'unwilling to work hard', 'irresponsible' and 'stubborn'. As a way forward everyone was asked to share the positive strengths of the child. It was then recognized that he was an avid reader, loved to sing and was good at football. The class teacher then suggested that we take these strengths as the starting point and just put aside everything else for a few weeks. Another colleague who had worked with the child in the previous grades shared that the child probably has a learning difference, so he needs to be dealt with more patiently and provided some one-on-one help. He further added that it would be a good idea to start with some positive feedback and make it balanced. Everyone agreed to offer this. We also spoke about focusing on what the student *does*, rather than acting on

assumptions of what he/she is *like*. Moreover, in sharing our feelings, we suggested that it is better to make 'I' statements (rather than 'you' or 'they' statements), for this would help build better communication and trust. The teachers slowly started working with the boy, focusing on his areas of strength and through these, also working on academics. He started anchoring book talks and organizing cultural evenings. He was also made an active member of the gardening club. All this helped him to come to know his unknown 'self' and gather confidence. The inner chaos started to settle. Slowly, he started coming out of his shell and became chirpier. Today, he is on his way to becoming more independent and can handle many things on his own. It is beautiful to see him smile, laugh, play, spend quality time with his friends, articulate his thoughts confidently in class, and become responsible for his learning. He loves to go for silent walks and writes poetry as well.

The Learning Resource Centre

While this collaborative approach has helped many children, nonetheless we do have a few children who need a little more support than what this process offers. These are children who have mild disabilities or children with special needs who are diverse learners. They struggle on the academic as well as social-emotional front. They need special interventions to make their learning process more joyous and meaningful. Hence, at Rajghat we felt that we could walk a few more steps and become inclusive in a wider sense. This is when we established the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) in 2017. The LRC is a whole school approach where we work together to support these diverse learners. This centre aims at creating an inclusive school by sensitizing teachers, parents and students. This is led by teachers who are trained to work with special needs children or are experts in remedial teaching. It is a space that is equipped to meet the demands of the diverse learners. The LRC also attempts to ease the journey of the child by exploring various concessions granted by examination boards and help in planning for the future of the child.

After having worked through our normal interventions with the child, giving enough time for the child to *unlearn, learn* and *relearn*, all efforts are made to build a conducive learning environment, keeping the unique nature of the child at the centre. Support classes, that take the form of one-on-one sessions or working in small groups, are anchored by the special educators. Intensive work is done with the parents as well. For many children this support is very helpful and they slowly start becoming responsible for their

learning. And yet, for some we feel that this support is not enough and they need something more. To figure out a way to work with such a child, we work out an assessment plan. Using informal tools, we take comprehensive feedback from current and previous teachers. This includes all aspects of the child—academic, emotional and physical. We also meet the parents and take their inputs too. Previous Knowledge Testing (PKT) is done to understand the current academic level of the child. This helps in creating a comprehensive profile of the child—strengths, needs and current academic levels. At that point the child is also sent for an external assessment with a comprehensive school report stating his current level, interventions done and problems faced. The formal assessment done outside the school by experts (psychologists, special educators, therapists) then acts as a guide map for the school and parents to work with the child. It helps us to identify the ‘dominant mode of learning’ of the child and offer more focussed help. The report is future-oriented and also guides us about concessions and accommodations which could be helpful for the child.

Concessions recognized by exam boards

Examination boards in India, such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), offer the following concessions or accommodations:

- Extra time or a scribe is provided during the examination to help the child give a better performance.
- Assignments and examination papers are marked for content and ideas, while ignoring handwriting and spelling mistakes.
- Use of a calculator is allowed as per some guidelines.
- The facility of choosing alternate subjects as per guidelines of the Board can be considered.
- Exemption from the third language may be considered.

Some people feel that these concessions encourage mollycoddling of the child. However, to me these concessions echo the positive spirit of inclusivity. To use an analogy: it is just like wearing glasses to support our vision. Over the past one and a half decades I have closely witnessed how these scaffolds help in weaving together an *alternative curriculum which is responsible and sensitive*. In other words, a curriculum which helps in the growth and development of every child. The emotional and academic aspects of a curriculum are two sides of the same coin. I feel that while dealing with the academic front, if we don't also provide the right kind of emotional support, it is a fragmentation

which is unjustified. I wonder what kind of inner world of the child we would then be nourishing.

These concessions liberate the child and lift their spirits. For instance, learners with dyslexia mostly struggle with spellings and correct grammar usage. They are slow at writing and some of them also struggle with calculations. When a child understands that he now has extra time and need not be conscious about spellings and grammar or that he can use a calculator, the inner knots start opening up for most of these children. They become so much more at ease and start responding positively to our interventions. One of my students was given calculator support, and just a month later he started figuring his way out and became independent in learning math concepts. We thus need to ask: is math only about calculations? Giving this little scaffold, and one that is recognised by the exam board too, eased the journey for the child and helped him walk a few steps towards excellence. His body language changed; he seemed to be so much more at ease, and enjoying his learning process. Another student of mine, who has autism, was given the flexibility of choosing another subject as a concession. The child dropped mathematics in grade nine and picked up dance instead. Prior to this, the child would have frequent mood swings, feel agitated most of the time, and stay isolated. It was difficult to see this child going through so much distress. But the moment this concession was put into effect, there was a complete turnaround. Slowly the child began participating in hostel chit chats; he began to play with others, crack jokes and seemed happy. There were clear positive shifts seen in all other areas of his life too. Was this not a step towards helping the child sort out the inner chaos he had been experiencing?

What finally matters

A few months ago, I met a few of my former students who were diverse learners and who had passed out from Rajghat school. Meeting your old students is always a pleasure. But for me the joy was double, as I could see them bubbling with confidence, living without fear and enjoying every bit of what they were doing now. This has made me think further about how important it is to teach our children to learn how to overcome fear, how to question, how to resolve conflicts, how to live together, in other words, how to be truly human! For me as a teacher, it has been a journey of exploring all the possibilities of inclusion through an alternative curriculum that is responsible and sensitive. This has also helped me to think and learn with my students in a boundless manner.

Visible Thinking

Systems Thinking as a Teaching Strategy

MEREDY BENSON RICE*



If you do not know yourself, your unconscious as well as your conscious states, all your inquiry will be twisted, given a bias. You will have no foundation for thinking which is rational, clear, logical, sane. Your thinking will be according to a certain pattern, formula, or set of ideas—but that is not really thinking. To think clearly, logically, without becoming neurotic, without being caught in any form of illusion, you have to know this whole process of your own consciousness.

—J Krishnamurti

7th Public Talk in Saanen, 1963

What is visible thinking?

The central idea of visible thinking is simple: making thinking visible. The vast majority of what we think is hidden. It stays in our heads, and we only articulate a small portion of it, a portion that even we, sometimes, are unclear about. By getting that thinking out of our brains in a way that it is ‘made visible’, we can make connections between and among those thoughts; thereby leading us to question our thinking, understand it more deeply, and when done together with others, see links between our own thought processes and that of others.

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There are many visible thinking tools teachers can use in the classroom including:

Think-Pair-Share: where students think about a question or topic individually, then pair up to discuss their thoughts with a partner and finally share their insights with the class.

See-Think-Wonder: where students look at an image or object, describe what they see, express what they think about it, and articulate what it makes them wonder.

Claim-Support-Question: where students make a claim about a topic, support it with evidence, and pose questions related to it.

Circle of Viewpoints: where students consider a topic or issue from multiple perspectives, discussing how different viewpoints might see and interpret it.

Think-Alouds: where teachers model their thinking process by verbalizing their thoughts while reading a text or solving a problem, encouraging students to do the same.

These are just a handful of visible thinking routines that teachers can use and if the reader of this is interested in more, I highly recommend going to Project Zero (based at Harvard).¹

Systems thinking: A visible thinking lens for educators

Systems thinking, while relevant to many different fields, comes under the umbrella of visible thinking as it pertains to education. I was first exposed to systems thinking through my interest in David Bohm (1917–92), mostly known in the science world for his work in quantum theory and his concept of wholeness and the implicate order in physics. He argued that our human tendency to see the world in a fragmentary way led to a limitation in our understanding of the ‘whole’ and has thereby contributed to many of the problems we face as humans living on planet Earth. His perspective resonated for me with Krishnamurti’s teachings on the dangers of fragmentary thinking. Like Krishnamurti’s attention to the need for a holistic perception to address human problems, Bohm also perceived reality as an unbroken whole, where everything is interconnected. Bohm and Krishnamurti had many conversations about these ideas through their long years of friendship and in no small way inspired an interest in me, as an educator, to explore how systems thinking might help children appreciate the interconnectedness of all things.

Much to my delight in 2012, I was lucky to be present at an educational conference where Derek Cabrera, a professor at Cornell University, launched a small book entitled *Thinking at Every Desk*, in which he focused on systems thinking, as it might be used in education to develop students' critical thinking skills. Since then, systems thinking has become a well-recognized tool in many educational settings and I believe it is an important one for schools such as ours.

As Krishnamurti suggests, can we: 'Learn to look at the whole of life from a level which is comprehensive, which has no fragmentation at all?'. And as Joseph Campbell observed: 'People who don't have a concept of the whole, can do very unfortunate things...'

Central to an understanding of systems thinking as it pertains to the classroom, is a focus on understanding the relationships between different aspects of a system and recognizing how everything within a system is connected (and is usually part of even larger systems). Unlike linear thinking, which looks at cause-and-effect relationships in isolation, systems thinking opens the door to understanding how a system's dynamics, interactions, and feedback loops impact the system as a whole. In simple terms, students can be introduced to the core principles of systems thinking as:

- Systems are everywhere.
- Systems are connected to other systems.
- Systems are visible and invisible.
- Systems have parts that work together.
- Systems change, evolve, and adapt.
- Systems have a cycle and patterns.
- Systems need energy to work.
- Systems can be damaged or broken but also repaired and fixed.
- Systems are part of a whole.

Systems thinking maps

Systems thinking maps are the visual representations used in the classroom to illustrate how different elements of a system interact and influence each other. It helps teachers and students see the bigger picture by showing relationships, feedback loops, and cause-and-effect connections within a complex topic or problem. These maps can range from simple diagrams to more detailed illustrations, depending on the complexity of the system being

studied. The maps are created together by the teacher and students, drawing out what is known, and sometimes what is not known about a system. This strategy is a wonderful way to visually display the collective thinking of the class and is valuable in fostering critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of how various components work together within systems—such as ecosystems, social structures, or even classroom dynamics.

Getting started

First of all, we could recognize that young children are amazing systems thinkers! They have a natural tendency to see the interconnectedness around them. A good way to start is with simpler systems that students are already fairly familiar with such as the water cycle, a local ecosystem, or the classroom community. Once you, as the teacher, become comfortable capturing student thinking in the form of a systems thinking map, there are a myriad of ways this routine can be incorporated into the classroom. Here are a few examples:

Science: Use systems thinking to explore ecosystems, the human body, and climate systems. What influence do our human actions have on these systems?

Mathematics: Apply systems thinking to understand patterns, relationships, and functions. Analyze population growth or financial systems.

Social Studies: Investigate historical events, economic systems, and cultural interactions through a systems thinking lens. For example, exploring the causes and effects of the Great Depression can reveal complex interdependencies.

Language Arts: Analyze literature by examining characters, plots, and settings as parts of a larger system. Discuss how different elements influence the story's outcome.

Social Justice: Explore a social justice issue such as racism or poverty in order to determine where parts of the system are unfair or broken and ways in which reparation might take place.

Art and Music: Explore the systems within artistic creations, such as the interplay of elements in a painting or the structure of a musical composition.

A call to action

Systems thinking can help young people situate things within systems and recognize the various people who participate—either directly or indirectly—within a particular system. Students also notice that a change in one aspect

of the system may have both intended and unintended effects on another aspect of the system.

When considering human interaction within systems, it can often lead to concrete action targeted towards repairing what is seen as a break in an existing system. For example, our third-grade class began with a systems thinking map on 'ability', including those assumptions made in our society about being able bodied. After exploring their thoughts on this system, the students decided to map the Oak Grove campus to see how a person in a wheelchair could navigate the campus. Suggestions for improvement to accessibility were then made to our campus planning committee.

Our first graders created a systems thinking map at the beginning of their exploration of the pond that is at the edge of the Oak Grove property. As the unit of study progressed, more and more components were added to the map, as students' knowledge of the pond system expanded. This inevitably led to exploring ways that the pond can be both negatively impacted (pollution, drought, trash, invasive plants, etc.) and positively impacted (conservation of water, picking up trash, educating the public) and what action the children might take to ensure the health of the system.

Why teach using the systems thinking lens?

Systems thinking is by nature differentiated and enhances all students' ability to think deeply, creatively, and critically. It fosters deep learning that goes beyond right answers and instead helps students tap into their ability to observe, ask questions and make connections. When students have a better understanding of the connections, relationships, and perspective of systems around them, they are better able to identify when systems are unbalanced, unfair, or broken. This can lead to positive social action which is immensely empowering for students.

Ultimately, systems thinking is a valuable tool for making student thinking visible, which in turn helps students to examine their own thinking as well as extend their thinking. It encourages students to view the world as interconnected; thereby, promoting a sense of care for the whole.

Want to learn more?

This piece is intended as a brief introduction for teachers. If you are interested in pursuing this further, here are some resources:

1. Project Zero (based at Harvard): <https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>

2. Systems Thinking Schools (primarily focused on elementary education): <https://systemsthinkingschools.org/>
3. Wildwood School Outreach Center (offer professional development): <https://www.wildwood.org/outreach>
4. *Thinking at Every Desk: Four Simple Skills to Transform Your Classroom*, Derek Cabrera and Laura Colosi. WW Norton & Company, 2012
5. *Making Thinking: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding and Independence For All Learners* by Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church, et al, Jossey-Bass, 2011

Growth Mindset in a Math Culture

SERRA BENSON*



I begin the school year with my third graders by spending time developing their growth mindset, creating a culture around math where mistakes are celebrated, and where struggle and hard work are valued over getting things ‘right’. Once this has been established, then I know we will go far with our math learning.

Oak Grove School math teachers did an online summer course with Jo Boaler, professor of mathematics at Stanford University. This course changed the way I approach math teaching and the results have been overwhelmingly positive. My students love Jo Boaler’s short videos available on her website, *YouCubed*, about how mistakes grow our brain, the importance of struggle, and how speed is not the most important thing in math. They learn to value deep thinking, brain plasticity, and believing in one’s ability to learn, among other topics. They especially love the *YouCubian* superheroes who fight math myths with science, such as the myth

of the ‘math person’. I sometimes dress as a *YouCubian* superhero for Halloween and spread the message that anyone can be good at math if they work hard, are willing to make mistakes, and believe in themselves.

I like to start the day with math while students are fresh and rested. We begin with Number Talks, an enquiry based mental math routine created by Kathy Richardson and Ruth Parker in the early 1990s. In my Number Talks, I write a question on the board such as $99+51$ and students solve it mentally. They are asked to ‘put a thumbs up quietly to their chest’ when they are ready with an answer which allows students who need more thinking time to keep going rather than rush. They can also signal with two or more fingers to show how many different strategies they thought of to arrive at their answer.

After giving them ample time to think, and when I see that most thumbs are up, I ask students to share all their

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answers. I write all of the class's solutions on the board, and ask a few students to share their strategies as I show their thinking process on the board. Students become confident sharing both their mistakes as well as correct answers, and the focus is on the many ways in which they solved the problem, such as composing and decomposing numbers, using a friendly number, place value, making 10, and so on. My favourite part about Number Talks is when we have multiple wrong answers and I get to hear students say with confidence, 'I see my mistake, I was thinking about it this way, but now I see that doesn't work.' When students can share their mistakes in front of their peers without shame or embarrassment, then I know that we have a safe class culture for learning.

Following our Number Talk we always do a 'Stretch Math' problem where I give students various questions and puzzles that require students to be comfortable about struggling with a task and trying multiple strategies or attempts to find a solution. I encourage them to draw pictures, visualize, write a number sentence, talk to each other, 'Try, Check, Revise', and other strategies. After giving

them sufficient time to work on it, we share partial solutions and things that did not work as well as what did work; and often there are multiple solutions that work. We may even extend the conversation to prove why some strategies are the only ones that can work.

I have seen many powerful changes in students' attitudes towards math based on my new teaching practices. Students have grown in confidence in the subject, and have developed a willingness to stick with hard problems and not give up. These changes have come from my shift towards developing students' growth mindset and pivoting away from focusing on the 'right answer'; instead, we celebrate the many ways in which students think about and approach a problem as well as the mistakes students make as they take risks and figure things out without fear of being 'wrong'.

Of all the shifts in teaching approaches I've experienced in my career, this one has been transformative. I encourage math teachers everywhere to explore and experiment with the growth mindset concept in their own classrooms.

On Learning a Language

KAVITHA M*



How do we describe a language? A language, as it is often characterized, is a means for communication. But does it really stop there? To me, a language we know and speak is also several layers of fragrant memories packed together. Is it not the first endearment we heard and still remember after several years? Does it not remind us of our favourite food as a child? It evokes the stories of generations of our ancestors, their way of life and what they considered as values to live by. A lot of the words we know in our native tongue might not have an equivalent word for them in another language and their meaning can rarely be captured in all its nuances in another language.

An example of this, in Tamil, is the word *neer veezhchi* which is a literal translation of the English word 'waterfall'. But there is an original Tamil term for this natural phenomenon of water descending in all its glory from the majestic heights of misty hills. That word would be *aruvi*. Though they are supposed to eventually label the same thing, these two words are separated by a huge chasm of feeling; only the latter evokes a sense of authenticity. I am sure one can recollect many such words and ideas from each of the languages we speak. I remember the word *mayilu* as a little child, an endearment that, when one attempts to translate it, results in a very ambiguous English word 'peacock'. A saying that my grandmother spoke, *Karthigai masathile kathrika kaambu kooda innikum*, uses the poetic device of alliteration to express how every part of the brinjal including its peduncle tastes lovely in the Tamil month of *Karthigai* i.e., the monsoon season. A language is hence much beyond simply being a device for communication. It transports the meanings and memories of the life of the people speaking it!

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‘A different language is a different vision of life.’

—Federico Fellini, Italian film director and screenwriter.

So how do we learn a language? Is it through nature or nurture? Can a child learn multiple languages at the same time? Does learning one language interfere with another? Or does it support the learning of another? In this article I explore some of these questions.

Nature and nurture

The physiology of learning and speaking a language is said to rely on two areas of the left hemisphere of the brain. The Broca’s area (in front of and just above the left ear) and the Wernicke’s area (around and under the left ear). Damage to Broca’s area is known to cause problems in speech production and damage in Wernicke’s area is known to cause problems in comprehension. There have been studies of people who have lost their ability to speak and comprehend. There are also examples of others who have managed to cope or relearn these facilities, resulting in studies on neuroplasticity and the ability of the brain to repair itself after an injury.

Apart from physiology, a language rich environment is seen as imperative in triggering the natural human predisposition to acquire language. This is an environment where the child can hear others talk to each other, to the child herself, and in which they have interactions with other children, along with singing songs, listening to music, reading books and many such culturally rich activities. While human beings are indeed born with an innate ability to acquire language, it is important for each one of us educators to appreciate this. It is also equally important to understand that this ability does not blossom if it does not get a language-rich and affection-filled environment.

There also seems to be a critical period for language acquisition, bestowed by nature and physiology. This is believed to be between two and fourteen years and during this time it seems like almost an effortless task. We do learn new languages beyond these years too, but this becomes much more challenging. It seems safe to conclude that while biology naturally provides us with this immense potential, an environment of exposure and nurture is needed to support our linguistic abilities. Moreover, while the first language is thus acquired more organically, the other languages we learn to speak are truly that—*learnt* rather than *acquired*. First language acquisition is largely a subconscious process. We may not be consciously aware of the rules of the language; instead, we have a ‘feel’ for correctness. A sentence simply ‘sounds’

right, or 'feels' right, and errors feel 'wrong', even if we do not consciously know which particular rule is being violated. Whereas in learning another language, a second language, we need to study the rules and learn from the errors even as we make them. In other words, we need to consciously learn the grammar and syntax of the new language.

Pedagogy for learning a new language

'You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.' This statement by the English writer, Geoffrey Willans, feels intuitively convincing to anyone who has taught and learnt a second language. And schools are often the places where we teach a second language. So how do we help children learn another language? In their second language, children require 'comprehensible inputs'. 'Comprehensible input' refers to using language which children are capable of understanding, and at the same time holds a challenge for them. An important part of making it comprehensible is to provide it in natural, communicative situations that are meaningful for children, and this helps children in making meaning of the language. For example, if children learning English already know some vocabulary in English, then 'comprehensible input' might mean using these words in sentences that are meaningful for them. Unlike traditional second language teaching, which requires the child to learn the structures and grammar rules first and then practice them as communication, effective second language acquisition requires 'going from meaning' to 'structure'.

Fluency in speech for a second language learner emerges over a period of time. Early speech will come only when the acquirer feels 'ready' This state of readiness, however, arrives at somewhat different times for different people. Early speech, moreover, is typically not grammatically accurate. Accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more comprehensible inputs (Krashen,1982:22). Besides the need for 'comprehensible input', some other factors also affect the acquisition of a second language. Children's motivation to learn the target language, their self-confidence, their curiosity, any anxiety about learning in general, and their attitude towards the language all affect language learning. These factors can either impede or encourage second language acquisition.

Most of the pedagogical literature in this area suggests that any successful attempt at the language acquisition process should bring together two key aspects: a) building skills; and b) building language experiences. Having worked with children over the last few years in teaching English

and Tamil, I share here some of my approaches in the latter domain. My emphasis has always been on developing a connection to and confidence in the language being taught and learnt rather than on instructing and checking for correctness. In order to build language experiences, I repeatedly go back to the following approaches:

- Reading stories of varying genres and appreciating that most creative expression emerges from a writer's questions and our attempts to understand the world around us. This implies also looking for the writer's meaning when reading and finding one's relationship with it.
- Reading curated stories with perspectives that allow one to glimpse things through other lenses, and this requires thinking through the text, gaining insights and building critical thinking.
- Exposure to poetry of different kinds as an attempt to build appreciation for the language and the writer. In doing this, we also understand and use the many poetic devices that make the language richer and sweeter.
- Doing role plays to encourage and to provide an outlet to the dramatic instinct in each of us, which is particularly so in young children. This has often resulted in a feeling of joy and copious laughter as well as serious critical thinking.

All these are but attempts to value literature as a way of appreciating the beauty in a language and to understand human life at large as well as one's own experiences.

Talking about the happenings around us often adds excitement and provides additional interesting inputs to learning in general and more so while learning languages. I share below some learning experiences specific to teaching English that I have deployed and enjoyed with children. A project titled 'POSTs' (Poems on Steps) by a duo calling themselves 'Step Sisters', Sheryl McCammon and Ruth Arnison, attracted our attention while learning poetry. Their effort is to make poetry accessible to the community at large by painting poems, up and down, down and up, across and along, steps and benches in public spaces scattered throughout the city of Dunedin in New Zealand. Sheryl paints while Ruth reads books to her. Both also talk to passersby. They paint the steps in random order letting the passersby guess the verse that is left out. 'POTS' was another venture by Melanie, a teaching artist in Hartford, Connecticut, USA. She developed 'Poetry on the Streets' as a public art project designed to engage communities in creative self-expression, connect people through the poetry of everyday life, and

share the words of people from different walks of life to promote compassion and greater understanding of one another. Each of her 'poets' picks a word from Melanie's 'jar of emotions' which they then use to compose a short poem right there on the spot and display it. Reading out loud and enacting poems, especially two or more voice poems from books such as *You read to me, I'll read to you* by Mary Ann Hoberman have given us hours of enjoyment. For prose pieces, expressive reading and role plays have been the equivalent of this. Activities such as encouraging reading poetry aloud to others at home as a homework activity, making bookmarks with favourite poems as we read the poem, keep a poem in your pocket, has also inspired poetry reading and writing in many of our young readers.

'To have another language is to possess a second soul'

Charlemagne (King of Franks)

Having had the fortune of loving Tamil and English and the greater joy of teaching both these to younger children as well, what can I say in conclusion? It simply brings me back to learning to love the language. If we can manage that then all else might just take care of itself!

Are We Slaves to Language?

JENNER J PRINCE*



*When we see how little we can express, it is a wonder
that any man ever takes up a pen a second time.*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

As a teacher in a fully residential school, I've had countless opportunities to engage with both teachers and students, whether on the playground or in the classroom. These interactions have ranged from light-hearted banter to profound, meaningful discussions. Yet, regardless of the nature of these conversations—or their stakes—I've often found myself unable to articulate more than half of what was swirling in my mind or heart. The vivid, colourful ideas in my head seemed to fade into dull shades of grey the moment they left my mouth. Initially, I thought this was due to my poor or even non-existent communication skills. 'If only I had the right words to express my ideas,' I often thought. But perhaps there was more to it.

My journey to uncovering the deeper truth began when I stumbled upon a quote attributed to J Krishnamurti: '... So you are not listening to a speaker but rather listening to yourself.' This line broke the inertia and compelled me to explore Krishnamurti's insights on language and communication further. One article, titled 'Can I strip myself of the network of language?', stood out and did not disappoint. One particularly profound statement in the article resonated deeply with me:

The very act of labelling, of giving a name to something, is a limitation, a barrier to understanding it fully ... the slavery to language. But if we know how to use language—the exact

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meaning of words, the content, and the significance of the depth of the word—then we are using language unemotionally, un sentimentally.

Two ideas from this had a strong impact: first, the notion of the slavery to language, and second, the phrase *using language unemotionally, un sentimentally*. With these revelations, my questions began to quieten down.

I continued my exploration, this time through the lens of evolutionary biology. As someone who doesn't believe in coincidences, I was surprised to stumble upon something eerily similar to the issue I was grappling with—only this time, framed within the clutches of science. Here is the gist of what I discovered: the primary function of language is *communication*. But why and when did the need for communication evolve? This question buzzed in my mind, and as soon as it took form, the answer effortlessly presented itself. I was reminded of the well-known Cognitive Trade-off Hypothesis. This fascinating theory, proposed by primatologist Tetsuro Matsuzawa, suggests that at a particular point in our cognitive evolution, humans sacrificed short-term working memory for the ability to weave sound waves into structured packages called *words*. Using these words as building blocks—paired with commonly agreed-upon rules—we constructed an abstract world called *language*. Whether this trade-off was worth it or not is a matter of opinion. After watching a chimpanzee

ace tests designed to measure short-term memory—on a scale that seems almost impossible for humans—I couldn't help but think—if given the choice, I'd shamelessly choose eidetic memory (also known as 'photographic memory') over the ability to chatter. But that's beside the point.

The Cognitive Trade-off Hypothesis brilliantly explains 'how' language evolved. The 'why' is fairly straightforward. When our chimp-like ancestors descended from the safety of the trees and began traversing the land, cooperation became essential for survival in a dangerous terrestrial world. Without claws, fangs, venom, or any natural defence mechanisms, we were forced to rely on *symbols* and *sounds* to survive and to procreate. This need to collaborate for survival and procreation literally shaped us into what we are today. Once again, I saw these ideas mirrored in a sentence from the J Krishnamurti article... 'So words, language drive us, shape us, shape our thinking, our behaviour, our action'.

But, like everything else, language isn't perfect. While it helped us survive the savannahs, it comes with a significant weakness: *inefficiency*. Think about how much information can actually be conveyed over time. A simple phrase like, 'I'm heading out,' commonly used when leaving one's residence, sparks a cascade of questions—Where? For what? With whom? When will you return? Answering all of these turns a straightforward 'I'm heading out' into a mini oration, which is

painfully impractical. This inefficiency is why professions where quick and precise communication is a matter of life and death develop their own unique jargon. Consider the specialized lingo used by surgeons or soldiers—it's a system designed to communicate vast amounts of information rapidly and with minimal loss of detail. Yet, even this solution has a caveat: both the speaker and listener require specialized training to understand each other clearly. Shared knowledge and context become essential. I've personally felt this frustration during a basketball game. In such a fast-paced sport, quick and clear communication among teammates is crucial to securing an advantage. With our 'normal' speech patterns, language becomes a limiting factor. On the court, we're compelled to adopt a specialized lingo to play effectively.

There's another layer to this story. Spoken language has a hidden weakness known as the 'McGurk Effect'. This phenomenon occurs when the brain sandwiches visual and auditory cues. Since auditory cues—words—can often be lost amidst environmental noise, the brain stitches these sounds to corresponding visual cues, polishing out potential errors. For example, if you are hearing the sound 'ba' while watching someone seemingly mouth the sound 'va,' your brain may interpret it as a third sound 'da' instead of 'ba.' Closing your eyes eliminates the visual influence, allowing you to recognize the sound as 'ba.' But open your eyes again, focus on the lip movement, and the

same sound mysteriously morphs back into 'da.' It's a fascinating and eerie quirk of perception.

If language is so incredibly inefficient, how has it stuck around? The short answer is simple: we had a LOT of time to talk. One theory suggests that before humans discovered fire, we spent endless hours, incessantly chewing on tubers and other tough foods to make them digestible. Our mouths were occupied. But when we learned to cook with fire, those fibrous foods became easier to consume—and suddenly, our mouths had a considerable amount of free time. We filled that time with *speech*. In short, there was no pressing need for language to be efficient. We had more than enough time to *inefficiently* convey our messages, no matter how roundabout.

Eventually, as we revelled in this newfound abundance of time to talk, we began to weaponize language. Deception and dishonesty are not unique to humans; they are observed in non-human animals, too. But language gave us the ability to craft elaborate, intricate webs of deception. While lying could grant short-term advantages, it carried long-term social consequences. According to Signaling Theory, 'talking' is a 'cheap signal' because anyone can do it—it requires far less effort than taking action. This disparity caused the value of actions to rise and the value of words to diminish. An invisible barrier began to form between 'speakers' and 'listeners'. Listeners, understandably, were reluctant to expend energy unpacking

words, as a 'cheap signal' lacked credibility.

This brings me to the crux of the matter: perhaps the reason my vivid, colourful ideas turn grey as they leave my mouth is that *this is precisely how it's meant to be*. We've paid a heavy price in evolving our human language, and from one perspective it doesn't seem like the wisest investment.

Yet, for all its flaws, language remains the best tool we have to package the intricacies of our inner worlds and deliver

them to others. It's an imperfect bridge, but one we cross daily, hoping the other side has the right context to unpack and make sense of our thoughts.

Then knowing the meaning of words unemotionally, without any reaction to the word, then we can enquire into this whole problem of our way of living, why we live this way, why every day of our life is conflict, violent, selfish, narrow, limited, anxious, fearful, uncertain, a muddle in which we live.

—Krishnamurti

Teaching History and Civics in Challenging Times

SANJAY MATHUR*



As teachers and house parents, we observe on a daily basis words and actions that indicate sensitivity, intelligence, fellowship, kindness, conviviality, respect, humour, responsibility, creativity, thoughtfulness and so on. At the same time, we observe insensitivity, rudeness, arrogance, harassment, bullying, timidity, dominance, judgement, envy, jealousy, disrespect, mocking, and abusive language. Dialogue and discussion with children, whether in class or hostel or the sports field, whether one on one or in groups or with the class as a whole, is necessary for the sake of a safe, healthy, and supportive environment, free of fear, in which all children may grow and mature to their potential.

It is without doubt that the school operates on the basis of certain values in order to function, such as the values above. But do we inculcate values in children? We do to a point, through dialogue and conversations, especially when we become aware of insensitivity or conflict between children. At the same time, we do not indoctrinate. We try and teach how to think, not what to think.

But what happens when children do not ‘flower in goodness?’ *And is it enough to be friendly only to one’s own friends? What about those who are different than us? Whether that be a different religion, gender, nationality, class, caste, colour and so on.*

We live in politically charged times, when politics has moved into the space of religion, fanned by social media, running roughshod over facts let alone sensitivity to others.

As a teacher of history and political science in senior school, it cannot but concern me to witness in the last two years:

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- An entire classroom's desks scrawled with either 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Sanatani Hindu', or 'Hindu' for a whole year (which I requested to be freshly painted when I took the room this year)
- The phrase 'Jai Shri Ram' written on the classroom bulletin board on return from Diwali break, which then inadvertently greeted a new Muslim teacher who taught at Jamia Islamia when the slogan was shouted in attacks on students and teachers in the anti-CAA¹ protests in 2019
- In a discussion on 'Religion in the News' in Culture class with Class 9, that looked at threats to the respective minority communities in Bangladesh and in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, the back row in the lecture theatre erupts in 'Jai Shri Ram' after I tell them that the crowd marching to survey the mosque was shouting 'Jai Shri Ram.'
- In the same discussion, in talking about how to keep communal harmony, one boy declares 'final solution' since we had just got through studying Nazism

'Final Solution' was the euphemism given by the Nazis to their plan to kill all Jews. Knowing the boy's sense of humour, I suspect he said it spontaneously just to get his fellow students to laugh, to make himself look smart, and to go with the crowd. While I normally provide plenty of latitude for questions and comments, at that moment I said, 'That is not appropriate, this is far too serious a subject.' After class, I asked him, 'You wouldn't have said that had my co-teacher been here today, would you?' He nodded that he wouldn't have. My co-teacher is Muslim.

This is a large part of the problem. We have no Muslim students to speak of at the school. Had we only 10 Muslim students, in a school of 220, things would be different, I am certain. Besides a handful of Muslims on staff, including contract staff, we see Muslims daily crossing the lane that divides junior school and senior school. To wit, over the wall of our sports field is a dargah and a mosque. According to the 2011 census, 28 per cent of Varanasi's population is Muslim. Hindus and Muslims have been economically dependent on each other for centuries, particularly in the weaving and sari industry. Yet we have no Muslim students. And, when asked, hardly any children have friends who are Muslim.

On occasions like these, I recall growing up in the United States from an early age and attending public schools that had every race and ethnicity—whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians. We got to know each other as people

first. So, when I learned in schools that blacks had once been slaves, I was shocked. How could my friends, their ancestors that is, have been slaves? It made no sense to me.

Going back to Rajghat Besant School where I teach, those are just a few incidents and observations. There are many others. It is perhaps in the nature of teaching History and Civics/Political Science that brings these out. But more than this, it is what is in the news, what is in the newspapers in the hostel, what is in social media and on YouTube at home, what extended family, friends, and neighbours talk about at home, what politicians drum up and serve for us to consume, that triggers such incidents.

In that discussion in Culture class, I might note that I had prepared slides and links to two videos, one on victimization of Hindus in Bangladesh and one on the most recent attempt to convert a mosque into a temple in Sambhal, and which also explained the Religious Places of Worship Act of 1991. This is Class 9, so it was not surprising that no one had heard of the Act. Moreover, I had prefaced our discussion with the following slide:

- Sensitive topics require sensitive and respectful discussion.
- We must raise good questions and seek facts, understand different points of view, be willing to adjust our point of view, not just take sides.
- School is about questioning and learning even as we are developing our values and points of view.
- We should always be prepared to look at any issue freshly.

The class did serve to educate; and it also served to show that young minds have formed more than we think. Once topics like converting a mosque to a temple are raised, it is all emotions and ‘Jai Shri Ram.’ You can hear it in what is said and read it in the faces, gestures, and side comments. And yet, it is about a third of Class 9 who lean politically one way, including sons of politicians, a third who are against communalism, and another third who are neutral or indifferent. In Class 12, it is different. By that age, it is possible for students to support a particular party and yet condemn the communalism the party is a part of.

On an earlier occasion, with the same Class 9, we were learning about the role of elections in the functioning of Indian democracy, and this included the Election Model Code of Conduct. I happened to show snippets of

election-time videos showing seasoned politicians making speeches in which they not only threw vitriol at each other but also alluded to the dangers their constituencies would face from people of another community, if they allowed any of the other parties to win. As children heard these speeches, many of them were stunned, no matter which political party they supported, and one boy whispered to another in Hindi, 'This is a mistake.'

Why are some children able to perceive harmful rhetoric and others are not? How is it that identities form so strong so early?

I had a student in class who, knowing hardly more than the little we are made to learn about the Constitution in the textbook and whatever I supplemented, said he wanted to be a politician and that, if elected, he would change the Constitution. How does this happen? When he did well on the test, I said to him, 'You have all the right answers, but you don't really believe this, do you, you want to change the Constitution, right?' He just smiled.

Just before the last day of studying Nazism, one boy informed me that a number of students in his hostel admired how Hitler 'made Germany great again' and how he conquered Western Europe in his famous *blitzkrieg* or 'lightning war.' He suggested we have a debate on Hitler, for and against. I said, let me think about it, thanks for telling me. The first thought in my mind was, well I'm not surprised, but how really is it possible? What are they not seeing? I had made clear, with emphasis, that the supporters of Hitler wound up dead on the battlefield of Stalingrad, for example, the largest battle ever in history, with one million dead in seven weary months, the fields littered with corpses, and that the Germans had lost.

Together, over three weeks meeting four days per week for forty minutes each class, we had learned about Germany after World War I, the Versailles Treaty which punished Germany for the war, the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, why they became popular and how they instituted dictatorship in place of democracy, took to aggression at home and abroad leading up to World War II. This was a war in which sixty million died including at least twelve million Germans and the 'extermination' of six million Jews and one million other 'undesirables' in concentration camps. We had taken the time to enquire into such questions as: Why did Hitler and the Nazis target Jews in particular? Why did people, including educated people, follow orders to kill even innocent civilians? What was education in Nazi Germany

like? Is it easy to get people to hate other people—if not, how did the Nazis do it? What are the techniques of propaganda used then and still used today? If you were afraid to resist the Nazis openly, on fear of incarceration or of death, how could you still have resisted them? How do Germans look back on Hitler today, with pride or shame or something else? Much of what we talked about I had written on the blackboard plus given daily homework assignments and notes that I checked at the beginning of every class.

So, I decided to approach the request for a debate in a particular way. The following day, I first wrote the proposition, ‘Hitler was a great leader’, on the board. I then asked the children to define leader—and we could appreciate that the word leader is used not only in politics, government, and the military, but also there are business leaders, sports leaders, religious leaders, school leaders, and so on. *Leader* is not a title; it is a description that is earned. What then makes a leader great? Children listed many things such as listening to different points of view, being inclusive, recognizing when you have made a mistake, being effective at getting things done, leaving a place better than it was before, and so on. So then, was Hitler a great leader? Silence. No one had listed that a great leader was someone who made powerful speeches, targeted violence at the minority community, and conquered territory. So, the answer that he was not a great leader seemed too obvious. We then had a short debate anyway on whether Hitler was good for Germany or not. In the end, I emphasized again to children that Hitler led Germany to devastation. Or didn’t he? What does social media say?

Many changes have been made to NCERT History and Political Science textbooks, and more are coming. For now, however, we still have the Constitution, and the textbooks reflect constitutional values. What are these? It is worth listing, since these values are what the teacher has to stand on. Class 12 textbooks such as *Themes of Indian History* and *Politics in Independent India* give extensive weight and value to diversity in terms of social group or community, religion, caste, gender, language, native place, way of life, and so on. Class 9 textbooks *Democracy Part 1* and *Our Contemporary World* thoughtfully include a critical analysis of democracy as well as an age-appropriate deep dive into the French Revolution, Russian Revolution, and Nazism. In all these texts, values of inclusivity (over and against previous exclusion), democracy (even in the face of valid criticism that is acknowledged), and even secularism (defined as an equal treatment of religions by the state as opposed to communalism) are endorsed.

The teacher, then, is free to endorse, even expected to endorse, values such as: political **liberty**, social and economic **equality**, **fraternity** between peoples, social **justice**, **inclusion** and not exclusion, **democracy** as an imperfect but still superior form of government, and an **equal treatment of religions** and not supremacy of any one religion.

Is this enough? Does this mean, if teachers adhere to the NCERT textbooks and miss no opportunity to highlight these seven values, that students will come out of schools as good citizens and that democracy will be served? We must be realistic even as the framers of the Constitution were realistic. It is worth reciting the famous warning of the President of the Drafting Committee, BR Ambedkar, in his speech to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949:

The second thing we must do is to observe the caution which John Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely not “to lay the liberties at the feet of even a great man or to trust him with powers which enable him to subvert the institutions.”... This caution is far more necessary in the case of India than in the case of any other country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship.

In that discussion in Culture class with Class 9, at one point, I posed the question, do you think of yourselves as Indians first or Hindus first? ‘Hindus’ said some, ‘Indians’ said others, ‘both’ others said. Then a girl in the front row said, ‘Sir, human beings first.’ She got it! How is it that we can evoke this sense of being ‘human first’, and not get caught in limiting identities? We need to take every opportunity to help students develop a shared sense of humanity and relate to the deeper values that underlie the Indian constitution.

Children are a reflection of their parents but also society. Society is a product of history. And, as teachers, we need to be faithful to *all* of history in its complexities and nuances, not just the ‘storyline’ of one community, people, or nation. Children who come to school must also expect to have their pre-existing beliefs on history and politics to be examined and, at times, challenged. Teachers too must examine their own beliefs.

The following quote from Krishnamurti is worth bearing in mind for any educator concerned with the individual and with society in the making:

My mind is rooted in the past. It is the result of time, of the past. The past is my tradition, my race, my culture, my history, my family, my name, my experience, my knowledge, my studies, what I have been taught, and so on. The whole of that is the me, the me which thought has identified as a separate entity, which it calls "I". From that "I", I function. The more that "I" is strong, violent, aggressive, expressing, demanding, pushing, driving, ambitious, the greater the conflict. That "I" is being encouraged all the time through society, through competition, through success, through various forms of psychological impressions that society pushes upon it. And society is created by this "I"—the society and the "I" are not two separate states, they are a unitary process.

—J Krishnamurti, Public Discussion 3, Saanen, 6 August 1964

As teachers, we need to be cognizant and self-aware of our own biases and prejudices, even as we relate with our students. As a teacher of history and civics it then becomes a further challenge to expose our students to diverse perspectives, help them question received beliefs and ideologies, think critically, and learn to explore their own human nature and deeper connection with fellow beings. Such is real education, and only such an education can sustain a sense of goodness in a democracy.

The Obsessive Pursuit of Success

SRINIVAS S*



When the Indian men's team won the T20 cricket World Cup in June 2024, there was a great outpouring of emotion from Indian players and fans alike. There was the joy following a hard-earned triumph, obviously, but there was also the relief that India had finally won a global trophy after coming close on several occasions in recent times. For India's opponents in the final, South Africa, however, it was yet another instance of 'so near yet so far'. Indeed, the South African team received a lot of well-meaning commiserations on social media even from within India. The predominant emotion in the country at the time, however, was one of pride—pride at the fact that 'our boys' have won something big at long last.

Now, what makes people identify themselves passionately, and often fanatically, with sports teams and their achievements is an important question. This article, however, concerns itself with two slightly different but just as

important questions: whence arises the obsession with winning or success, and how does it interact with the human psyche and society? I consider these two questions important because they concern many of us to varying degrees and not just those people who work in and around the domains of professional sport.

Success in sports

Even in the world of sports, professionals are not alone in pursuing success with an almost religious zeal. Winning, alongside the setting of records, has become the sole point of sports even among people who play various games at the school or college levels. One immediately obvious and unfortunate result of this almost blind emphasis on success in the playfield is that it rids 'sport' of its etymological essence, namely, leisure or a pastime. To suggest a turn of phrase, obsessive attachment to the idea of success does not allow sport to be a 'good sport'.

A second fallout of the obsessive pursuit of success one sees on the sports

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field is that it psychologically separates the winners from the losers, though everyone accepts, at least in principle, that one cannot exist without the other. What is worse is that the playing regulations in some sports are geared towards sustaining this psychological division rather than addressing or challenging it. In the short formats of cricket, for example, ties, a result where the two playing teams end on the same score, have been discontinued. In football, penalty kicks usually decide the winner if teams tie on the number of goals they have scored in normal time. In tennis, sets (and therefore matches) are typically decided by tie-breakers if both players win six games each in a given set. Eliminating ties from sporting contests may ostensibly make them more exciting for the fans, but they also make them polarizing, which takes away some of the joy of playing and watching sport. Players and fans alike feel some dissatisfaction with the outcome of a game coming down to a tie-breaker, which is more a matter of luck than anything else.

Thirdly, desperation to succeed in the sport one plays may come at an ethical price. While sportspersons often acquire commitment and discipline in trying to develop a 'winning attitude', they are also known to play fast and loose with the definition of fair play, raising important questions about sportspersonship. Some of these questions concern the relationship between competing participants (e.g., is it fair to insult an opponent in the name of 'banter'? Is it all right not to shake

hands with an opponent when one does not win?) and others have to do with the psychological and emotional well-being of everyone who plays sports (e.g., is it fair to intimidate opponents? Is it acceptable to shout at a colleague when they have made a mistake?) Answers to such questions are invariably reflected in the actions of those who play sport professionally. Professional sportspeople also tend to influence (though it may be unfair to hold them to higher standards of conduct than others) the playing of sports at all levels, including schools and colleges, and have the power to shape a sports fan's attitude towards success and failure.

Success in the classroom

'Winning' as a watchword is, however, by no means restricted to the sports field. It has infected academia as well, with classrooms in schools and colleges today being incubation centres for success rather than places of meaningful and joyful learning. This is not to say that learning and success cannot coexist in an academic space, but the emphasis on the latter is so strong that the former is often used solely as a means to achieve the latter. Consequently, learning for the sake of learning takes a backseat.

Just like success on the sports field, success in the classroom is measured as well. Only the units of measurement, as we know, are different: for goals, runs, wickets, points, read marks, GPA, ranks, and so on. Inevitably, measurement in the latter case gives rise to competitiveness and

comparison just as it does in the former case. Competitiveness and comparison in turn goad students to become the 'first' or the 'best' in examinations, especially in a populous country like India, where the so-called 'cut-offs' for admission into institutes of excellence continue to be extremely high despite there being more such institutes now than ever before.

There are 'alternative' institutions, particularly schools, where competition and the pursuit of success are critically examined, if not actively discouraged. Even in these places, however, students are not completely free of social expectations and are apt to be affected by the spirit of competition. In Rishi Valley School, for example, students entering grade nine suddenly find themselves giving weekly tests and receiving grades or marks for their work. At least some of them develop a competitive edge, either of their own accord, or because of some combination of external expectations, peer pressure and anxieties about the future, and end up comparing their 'performance' in tests with that of others. This attitude stands in sharp contrast to what J Krishnamurti, the founder of the school, has to say about the dangers of comparison and competition, which go hand in hand:

When A is compared to B who is clever, bright, assertive, that very comparison destroys A. This destruction takes the form of competition, of imitation of and conformity to the patterns set by B. This breeds, consciously or unconsciously, antagonism, jealousy,

anxiety and even fear; and this becomes the condition in which A lives for the rest of his life, always measuring, always comparing psychologically and physically.

Perceptive students in schools like Rishi Valley, but also elsewhere, may be aware of the pitfalls of setting store by academic success and would rather live in an environment where learning is not endorsed by a number or a letter in a test or assignment sheet. Still, they cannot often help being attached to numbers or letters because of a vague but (for them) very real fear of the future, and because of the external expectations mentioned earlier. As a result, they find it a challenge to find their way through the emotions associated with tests and examinations.

Beyond success and failure

Familial and/or social expectations often underpin the pursuit of money and fame, which are popular indicators of success in adult life. There can be little doubt that these expectations also help shape a student's attitude towards studies and sports. Pursuit of success is additionally linked to the self or the ego; in other words, to a mind seeking something to which it can cling. As Krishnamurti puts it:

The pursuit of success is the desire for the "more", and a mind that is constantly demanding the "more" is not an intelligent mind...because its demand for the "more" implies a constant struggle [of the self] in terms of the pattern which society has set for it. [parentheses mine]

The constant struggle of the self in pursuit of fulfilment or success often causes conflict between what (or where) one is and what (or where) one wants to be. This kind of conflict, as Krishnamurti often points out, constrains the way we live life. Living without constraints, however, does not depend so much on wishing away these measurements or results from our world, perhaps an unrealistic prospect, as trying to change the way each one of us looks at them. As Rudyard Kipling writes:

*If you can dream—and not make
dreams your master;*

*If you can think—and not make
thoughts your aim;*

*If you can meet with Triumph and
Disaster*

*And treat those two impostors just the
same...*

*Yours is the Earth and everything
that's in it.*

It is difficult to know whether Kipling intended to convey a spiritual message when he wrote the last of the quoted lines. For the purposes of this piece, however, it may be viewed as carrying one: 'to have the Earth and everything in it' entails being completely free of the influence of thought. To put it differently, only a free being, a being free of the thought-strengthened compulsion to compete, compare and succeed, can feel at one with the Earth and live in harmony with 'everything that's in it'.

Psychological attachments are a great impediment to living one's life freely. In

this article I have explored one of the strongest psychological attachments of our age, namely the strong desire for and the unapologetic pursuit of success, particularly in the context of sports and academia. The other side of the coin is the fear or hatred of failure, which while not explored in detail here, has been hinted at in passing. Results in a sporting contest and grades in a test may be inevitable as things stand at present, but is it not possible to view them as incidental to an activity—or, to put it in Kipling's words, as 'impostors' without any real or intrinsic value? Doing so might take us a step closer to being happy human beings.

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What Are We Doing To Our Children?

PRATHIMA DAYANIDHI*



Parenting is one of the most significant responsibilities that a person can take on. It involves raising another human being with the right value systems so that the child can become a responsible individual in society. Education plays a major role in this upbringing, both at school and college. Most Indian parents go through the rigorous (and often stressful) process of choosing the right kind of education for their child, based on their own upbringing and their own ideas. As the child grows, as in all relationships, parents too discover their own expectations for the child. It usually starts with small steps, such as keeping the child busy in a 'productive' way rather than letting them watch TV; this is soon replaced by filling the child's day with non-stop classes; and finally, pushing the child to excel in everything they do, but more so in academics. If one is not aware of where one's expectations are stemming from, there is a greater possibility of altering the child's inherent personality, which can lead to damaging

their confidence and self-image. It is a delicate balancing act. Right parenting can't be found in books; it comes more from one's own intuition, observation, and wisdom than anywhere else.

Being in the field of education for fifteen years as a teacher in one of the alternative schools in Bangalore (The Valley School), I take the liberty of sharing my views on education and parenting. This is based on my interactions with many parents and students of all ages. It is important to understand that schooling is not only about academics, and that there is much more needed for children to grow to be well-rounded individuals. This applies to children of all ages including those who are college-going. In our country, there is a view that pre-university education is the gateway into higher education, and so, it is the most important milestone for a child. As a child approaches higher grades, this view, almost a conviction, often provokes parents to begin a frenzied search for institutes that will put their

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offspring through rigorous academic drills. That pre-university education is an important milestone in a child's life may be true. However, as I mentioned earlier, education is not limited to academics.

If given the right environment, I have seen children growing into mature mini adults, coming into their own, thinking, responding, and relating to various issues around them. When I say the 'right environment', I mean an affectionate, friendly, but rigorous approach with an exposure to various thought processes. This also includes introducing them to various art forms and physical activities. The late adolescent period is a crucial time in their lives as they are rediscovering themselves as individuals with apparently vast potential. When they are encouraged to build upon their individuality, one can witness their flowering into sensible, sensitive, and responsible adults who can make valid decisions for themselves.

This is unusual, though. When I look around, I am alarmed by the kind of stress and torment many students are put through in the name of pre-university education. When we read news articles about students committing suicide, unable to cope with academic pressure, our hearts go out to the child. And yet, the number of parents subjecting their children to such abomination seems to be increasing. Isn't that frightening? And sad? Let me share a few scenarios that I have witnessed in recent days that have shaken me to the core.

Scenario 1: There are a few cities in Karnataka (such as Mangalore) that are known for the 'best' coaching centres for pre-university students aspiring to be doctors and engineers (the keyword here being 'best'). There are about 2000–2500 enrolments every year from all over the state, country, and even NRIs. Enrolments begin with an initial written test and interview(s). Based on the student's performance in the test and their preference for CET or NEET, they are placed in different sections. Teenagers who are entering the pre-university level are not very easy to manage (raging hormones, tendency to question authority, wanting more freedom). One of the most convenient ways to 'handle' them is to impose strict rules to keep them in check and train them to be part of the herd. Many institutes follow this approach. Especially the colleges with hostels. Girls and boys are strictly prohibited from talking to each other outside classrooms, and once the classes are over students are expected to head straight to their rooms. Classes are Monday through Saturday, 7 am to 7 pm. That is a seventy-two-hour week. Four short breaks are allowed daily. Most institutes provide good food to satisfy the taste buds of teenagers.

Apparently, there are yoga and meditation classes in between to help them 'balance' the stress of stretching themselves beyond their usual capacities. Very little or no sports/games/art/music finds a place in the schedule. Every other

day, students are allowed a thirty-minute-long phone call to their parents.

Scenario 2: If parents are not keen on putting their children into these hostels, they have the convenient option of day schooling. Many parents (mothers, especially) move from small towns to cities and rent a house to stay with their children so that they can make them feel secure and continue to coax them to go through it all, since the hardship is only for two years. In such day schools, students attend classes Monday through Saturday, 9 am to 7 pm, or sixty hours a week. Since this may not be enough considering that the hostel students spend seventy-two hours a week in school, some institute authorities have come up with the brilliant solution to have classes on Sundays! While Sunday classes are for just half a day, from 9 am to 1 pm, it seems adding four more hours to the day scholar's schedule is still better than twelve whole hours of missed academics. Thus the students who opt to become day scholars must go to school on all seven days of the week. But it's apparently not all that bad: on Sundays they get to attend classes wearing a 'sports uniform'. And on general holidays they get to wear a 'colour dress' to school. Isn't that fun?

Scenario 3: There are many integrated coaching centres that offer PUC along with coaching for NEET or CET. These centres are available in plenty in and around Bengaluru. They too promise 'best' results. Some are apparently run by former IITians. Here too the scenario

is pretty much like the previous two scenarios, with students having to attend classes for ten to twelve hours a day (including Sunday) for revision and tests. Some coaching centres have mandated that students stay Monday through Friday in the hostel. If students are lucky, they may have one class for games in a week. Some of these coaching centres only focus on the 'core' subjects and students have to study non-core subjects, such as languages on their own. The upside is that they get to stay at home with their parents unlike the previous scenarios. This makes the torture a little more bearable, perhaps?

Scenario 4: This is for those students from small towns whose parents cannot afford to send their children to hostels, or do not have the heart to subject them to the above-mentioned hostel life. They do not have facilities like those in Bengaluru where the students can go to integrated coaching centres. What can they do if they aspire for 'best' education? Of course, where there is demand there is supply. The smaller-town youngsters attend pre-university college from 9 am to 5 pm, come home, and then sit in front of the computer for three-hour long online coaching classes every evening. Perhaps a couple of hours of classes on Sundays too. See how parents and coaching centres have found 'perfect' solutions for providing the 'best' education!

In all of the above scenarios we sense the intent of the parents and the facilities offered by the colleges/coaching centres. But in all this, where is the voice

or will of the student? At the end of this rigorous academic training, quite a few students perhaps do manage to get into prestigious colleges for engineering and medicine. But then the university courses demand further rigour and discipline, as is expected of higher education. Which means the journey of stress and rigour goes on for six to eight years for the student. More, if they drop a year or two to get into the college/university of their choice. Six to eight years of a stressful life which demands discipline and rigour with mostly nothing but studying. Why will this not raise young teenagers to become individuals with lopsided development and little emotional maturity? Why are so many parents only concerned with tangible academic progress? What about the physical and mental growth along with it? Students who are subjected to six to eight years of continuous stress come out into the world with little or no emotional resilience because they have not been given the chance to develop that life-saving skill. Some succumb to suicide, unable to cope with the stress; the rest struggle hard to balance work, life, and relationships. What are we doing to these youngsters as a society?

Subjecting young ones to blinding educational methods has become a vicious cycle. Parents want the 'best' for their children, without realising or pausing to ask themselves 'best according to whom? Or best for whom?' So-called educational institutes come up with more and more torturous ways to squeeze out

'stupendous results' from their students. Who is listening to the students? Is it enough to have counsellors for addressing the symptoms and to pacify parents that all will be well? Shouldn't we be looking at the root cause of all of this?

For working adults around the world, we have labour laws. Every country has defined the working hours per week (in India it is so far forty-eight hours). The employer is mandated to compensate for the additional hours put in by the employee. This may or may not be followed by all the companies/factories, but the laws are in place for enforcing this. But what about laws for students? Shouldn't there be regulations that mandate a maximum number of hours a student can attend classes? Shouldn't there be at least a day's break in a week? Is this not a basic human need? Countries are now considering three-day or four-day work weeks, while many of our young ones struggle with seventy-two hours a week with nothing to look forward to other than a colour dress or a games dress! The call of the hour is to normalize the process of education, especially the pre-university level, rather than viewing it as the ultimate entryway into the world of opportunities. Not every student is meant to be a doctor or engineer. We need to stop pushing them to achieve ridiculous 99 per cent results. Rigor is needed, not torture. There is a fine line between the two.

Most of us know about Kota in Rajasthan, considered the Mecca of pre-

university preparation, and what its current situation is. A web series titled 'Kota Factory' (aptly named) on Netflix gives a true glimpse. There are statistics sharing data about the stress-related trauma and suicides amongst students in Kota. And yet, students are sent there every year. We need to pause and think: what makes parents send their children

to such institutes in spite of knowing the harsh struggles they may have to go through? And now, alarmingly, there are Kotas mushrooming all over our country. If parents take the first crucial step of deciding that their children deserve more than Kota, how do you think things would change?

Paper planes, name blunders and life lessons: Building relationships with middle schoolers

PRIYANKA SOMAN*



Over the past six years, I've had the joy (and occasional experience of chaos) of working closely with middle school students. It's a rollercoaster phase in their lives—packed with changes, emotions, and moments of self-discovery. It is also one of the most fascinating chapters in these children's development. I often find myself reflecting on how much relationships shape the growth and self-confidence of children. Children have an inherent need to feel connected. Adults, therefore, need to ensure that the relationships they form are healthy and authentic. When I first started teaching, I knew that relationships mattered—but I had no idea where to begin in building these connections. In this short article I would like to share my journey of learning what healthy relationships might mean to middle schoolers and how adults can support them through this somewhat stormy but crucial stage.

In those early days at school, I made a deliberate effort to be approachable and open. I wanted my students to feel comfortable sharing their problems with me, whether it was about missing homework or losing a pen. I relied on small but meaningful actions like smiling, making eye contact, and just listening. I still remember one piece of advice from a more experienced teacher: 'Give your full attention when a student speaks. Even if it's about a pencil sharpener, be empathetic and understanding.' Her words stuck. I quickly learned that body language speaks louder than words, and fairness is all with middle schoolers. Treating each child with respect, regardless of their behaviour, became my mantra. But this is easier said than done—especially on a day when a student decided that launching paper planes mid-lesson was a legitimate science experiment!

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Then there was the name game. Oh, the struggle! I've never been great with remembering names, but I knew that learning their names was crucial. I came up with all sorts of mental tricks—rhyming, visual cues, and once, even a song. It helped build bonds and gave me acceptance in the classroom. After all, there's nothing like looking at a student and confidently calling out his name...only to hear, 'Akka, that's not me.' Awkward, but memorable.

As the years rolled by, I made it a point to learn about my students' interests during individual conversations. I found out who played football, who doodled in their notebooks, and who had memorized every Harry Potter spell. These little details became conversation starters and trust builders. I also started using group activities to encourage teamwork. Walking around during these sessions often gave me glimpses into their work. Once, I overheard a heated debate about whether Messi could beat up Ronaldo. It became so intense that I had to almost host a courtroom-style debate just to settle it.

Storytelling uncovered one of my hidden talents. I shared funny anecdotes about my dog, my car, and even my daughter. These stories turned lessons into conversations and made the classroom feel more like a cosy chit-chat than a rigid lecture. Once, I told them how my little daughter chewed up my middle school science lesson plan book. One student, very earnestly, asked if I'd tried positive reinforcement to shape her behaviour. Apparently, I was being out-taught by a twelve-year-old!

Setting boundaries was crucial too. I introduced classroom norms early on and reinforced them often. I also modelled the behaviours I wanted them to adopt, for instance demonstrating how to share classroom supplies like crayons, ruler and sharpeners without sparking a fight. But I quickly discovered that my 'serious teacher face' was no match for their innocent eyes when asking for extra free time. They could probably teach any adult negotiation skills very effectively. Boundaries weren't just about classroom norms, though. They were also about helping students reflect on their relationships. During circle time, we tackled questions like: *What happens if I don't stand up for myself? How does it affect me when I let people talk to me however they want? How do you handle it when one friend is angry at another? Do you take sides?* Such discussions brought out surprising insights and more than a few laugh-out-loud moments. One student confidently declared, 'If your friend is angry, tell Akka and call the person to your lunch table. Food fixes everything.' Honestly, this is not bad advice.

Perhaps the biggest lesson I learned through all this is that we adults don't need to have all the answers. Middle school relationships are unpredictable. The best we can do is keep listening, ask questions, and grow alongside them. I remind my students (and myself) that sustaining relationships often means hard work, but it is worth doing. After all, the connections we build today shapes who we become tomorrow—whether we are twelve or thirty-seven.

The Wholeness of Things

KAAVYA NAG*



In his 1964 lecture titled ‘The Relation of Physics to other Sciences’, the physicist Richard Feynman speaks about the connectedness of everything.

A poet once said, “The whole universe is in a glass of wine.” We will probably never know in what sense he meant that, for poets do not write to be understood. But it is true that if we look at a glass of wine closely enough, we see the entire universe. There are the things of physics: the twisting liquid which evaporates depending on the wind and weather, the reflections in the glass, and our imagination adds the atoms. The glass is a distillation of the earth’s rocks, and in its composition, we see the secrets of the universe’s age, and the evolution of stars. What strange array of chemicals are in the wine? How did they come to be? There are the ferments, the enzymes, the substrates, and the products. There in wine is found the great generalization: all life is fermentation. Nobody can discover the chemistry of wine without discovering, as did Louis Pasteur, the cause of much disease. How vivid is the claret, pressing its existence into the consciousness that watches it! If our small minds, for some convenience, divide this glass of wine, this universe, into parts—physics, biology, geology, astronomy, psychology, and so on—remember that nature does not know it! So let us put it all back together, not forgetting ultimately what it is for. Let it give us one more final pleasure: drink it and forget it all!

Often, it so happens that the things we do and the subjects we teach are compartmentalized into physics and geography, art and history and chemistry. We forget that Watson and Crick may not have won the race against Pauling to crack the structure of DNA, if Rosalind Franklin (and her excellent

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X-ray crystallography work) had not been in the vicinity! Note also that all of this is traditionally taught as a part of ‘biology’. This is but one example of the interconnectedness of every little part of the universe, while we, in our attempt to understand the world, break things down into smaller and smaller compartments.

Krishnamurti too speaks in depth about the intricate threads that connect all life. He refers in particular to the role of the educator in helping a student become more sensitive to the world around, and to the idea that we ‘are all together, we are all human beings, living on this extraordinary, beautiful earth.’¹ One of the ways in which we can see the wholeness of things is when we are observing nature without a view to analyze or compartmentalize it.

In the Krishnamurti schools, the campus is designed to offer opportunities for this whole vision. The very idea of a large natural space for a school is intentional. Additionally, research now indicates that such spaces play an important role in learning, building social skills, wellbeing, and a closer connection with nature.² Studies strongly suggest that when young people are disconnected from the natural world—physically, spiritually or emotionally—it has a marked effect on their wellbeing.³

Over the past year and a half, we have been working on building up a nursery and seed bank of native species of plants found in our eco-region (specifically the Southern Deccan Plateau Dry Deciduous Forests, of which The Valley School is a part). The intent is to conserve, in some small way, these fast-disappearing landscapes. In our efforts, we have come to depend on the trees (that literally grew up with the school themselves) for quality seeds that will propagate the next generation of saplings.

Satvan, the physical space in which we have the nursery, is a repository of species native to the region. A question we have been asking in the presence of these quiet growing things is how we can share this sense of wonder, observation and quietness with young learners. At the nursery, nature has been the inspiration and the questioner. It is often said that while we may think we are nurturing our garden, we are in truth just providing the right conditions for the plants to grow. The plant grows by itself, and a farmer knows this well. What he does, as the farmer, is to create the conditions under which the plant will thrive.

Is this not so with children too? Just like a seed, sitting there, waiting for the right conditions, children too come with their innate sense of curiosity and

wonder about this world. How then, do we try to facilitate more collaborative learning in and from the outdoors?

It is with these threads that we started working on gently guided observational learning in nature for children, from the young learner aged about ten to the older ones who are all of seventeen. When children are given these opportunities—importantly, in the company of their peers—they develop not just a quality of silence and attention, but also build meaningful connections with each other, and a lasting bond with nature. This kind of engagement may already be integrated in the early years. However, there is an increased focus on classroom-based learning in the middle and high school years. Ironically, while studies have repeatedly shown that spending time outdoors is vital for children in their growing years, even subjects such as biology, ecology, environmental studies and geography—all subjects with obvious connections to the outdoors—are increasingly taught in the classroom setting, or in a laboratory. Learning in the field about the diversity of life, soil erosion, insect adaptations, geology, deep time, or mutualism is an immersive and lasting experience, and one that classroom learning cannot replace.

At one level, these are lessons about how plants can clone themselves outside a laboratory, how figs and fig wasps depend upon each other, how a rock of Peninsular Gneiss we stand on came to be formed over three billion years ago, or how a single drop of water from the pond can be so full of life. At another level though, these activities serve as an entry-point of sorts—a way of engaging with the natural world that employs multiple senses, draws on existing knowledge, and raises questions for further discussion.

Simple guided field modules are combined (when required) with a field biology kit. For example, students carry a dissection kit, a hand lens, and a pocket microscope (capable of magnifying an object 100 times) with them to observe different types of creepers and climbers, and study the structures that plants use to cling on to other surfaces. Students are encouraged to express aloud all their observations, especially when paired up with a buddy or two. As a guide, one is encouraged not to filter out any observations. This makes nature observation a social activity, and keeps observations in conscious working memory long enough for the brain to convert them to long term memories. The focus is deliberately moving away from learning the names of species—which plant, which bird, or which insect—and towards asking questions about the way they live, or how they fly, what they eat and so on.

A rewarding project we conducted recently with students of class nine was to observe the flowering parts of different types of grasses, one of the most successful families of plants worldwide. A small 50 ft x 50 ft area on the campus had more than fifteen different types of grasses. None of us knew the species names of the grasses, and nor was it the point of our exercise. The idea was to get each group of students to observe three types of grasses at close quarters, and either question or verify their theoretical knowledge of monocots and dicots, looking at the roots, shoots and flowering parts of grasses. Seeing the sheer diversity of plants around, students were able to really see how much variation exists in nature. They asked so many questions in that short duration of time: Why does a compound leaf sometimes look like a monocot leaf? Why aren't grass flowers colourful? Why don't they smell nice? Can I pull up the grass and see the roots? Why doesn't it look like this in the textbook? Why does a spikelet look so different from a typical flower?

This kind of engagement in nature serves not just to question the physical world and learn from it, but also, as Feynman often said, it brings in an 'enthusiasm for enquiry'. Hopefully, these short stints spark the questioning spirit in young minds, to set the tone for learning, collaborating and listening amidst nature. After all, isn't this what makes us human, capable of seeing the wholeness of things?

1 From Krishnamurti's *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning*

2 Sam M & Kouhirostami M, *A Critical Review on the Impact of Combining Outdoor Spaces and Nature with Learning Spaces on Students' Learning Ability*, GRID, 2020

3 Capaldi, C.A., RL Dopko, and JM Zelenski, 'The Relationship between Nature Connectedness and Happiness: A Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2014. 5.

Some thoughts on

TO BE WHOLE

To Be Whole

ALOK MATHUR



To be whole, I believe, is a fundamental yearning in each of us. What does this mean? And how does this urge arise and seek expression in my life? What does this have to do with education, with learning? I briefly explore these questions.

Seeking to be whole arises when there is a poignant awareness of being *divided inwardly*, fragmented in one's thought, feeling and action. As we live with many 'roles' and 'identities' that are ascribed to us, or that we take on, in multiple contexts and relationships, we generate shifting images of 'self' and 'others'. We find ourselves negotiating the changing contexts and demands of life, at times being pulled this way and that, seeking an elusive balance. Can there not be a feeling of harmony, a relatedness to others, to life and to our work, that has no division: the feeling of being whole?

A wise person once deeply questioned me: *have you found out what you love (to do)? And, sir, have you discovered meditation?* The implication: if one does not plumb the depth of these questions, life remains conflicted. These questions serve as a lodestar.

As a partial response: I know that I love *teaching*. I cherish the company of young people, the freshness of human interaction it affords, the communication and exchange of ideas and feelings, its occasional joys and at times pains. Being a teacher provides a measure of 'who I am', and with minimal conflict. And yet, even as one may continue to be challenged and grow as a teacher, does one need to shape this as an 'identity', ie. something that is inherently separative?

I am also drawn to *nature*, and have been fortunate to live and work in a valley with magnificent rocks, trees and thriving bird and plant life.

Amidst the apprehension of a chaotic, degenerating and fragmented human world, these lighten the spirit whenever one feels their presence and beneficence. They make no demands and yet allow for a vibrant sense of life around. What underlies our place within this other-than-human world? There remain hints of deeper connections to be discovered.

And what of meditation? Is it to do with time set aside for quieting inner rumblings, observing the arising of thoughts in constant transition, questioning the multi-layered sense of 'self'? At times there is a slowing down of thinking, a feeling of body, mind and breath being in harmony. There is a subtle silence between thoughts, an awakening of the senses, a feeling of space. All projections of mind momentarily drop, a sense of subjective clarity emerges, and one feels somewhat whole. But surely, there is much more to it. Can this not thread through one's relationships and mundane daily activities? And could not the light of meditation penetrate the darkness of our divided human world, dissolve its heavy burden?

As an educator, I go back to my initial question: could this call to 'be whole' foster a different kind of learning in the young as well as the old, the student and the teacher? Might it nurture the beginnings of a penetration into the inner world that inevitably shapes the outer? Become aware of our divided selves, learn the ways of the 'self', and awaken a feeling of wholeness? If this can happen in our educational contexts, it may well be a saving grace for humanity.

To be whole

KAMALA MUKUNDA



I find myself often torn between two or more alternatives. Whether to tell a person what I think or not, whether to work or read a book or check my mail, whether to take a bus or a taxi. The feeling is one of being fragmented, as if there are multiple ‘selves’ putting forward their case for what should happen. I experience these pulls and tugs less as clear and fully articulated, more as muddled and feeling-laden. And finally, I go ahead and do something, so I wonder, was there someone in charge, who reviewed everything and took a final call? This has been the situation for as long as I can remember, and when I look at my colleagues and students, I see them in the same boat.

Recently, we were pointing out to our students a habit of negotiation that they have fallen into, for small, everyday matters: from being on time for breakfast in the morning, to getting into bed at the agreed-upon time at night. At each step through the day, there is the tendency to say *just ten minutes more, come on, what’s the big deal?* During our conversation the students were in complete agreement over the fact that times need to be respected in a school community. Yet as my colleague pointed out, this young student—who is agreeing with me now—is not the same one I will encounter at 10.30 at night; that will be the *just ten minutes more* student. These feel like two different people, and in that case, what is the use of talking to only one of them?

Krishnamurti describes this as a state of conflicting desires, and calls it fragmentation. He has invited us to observe it within ourselves. In a dialogue with David Bohm in 1976, he put it this way: ‘Can one be aware, conscious, know, the various fragments, examining one by one by one by

one, and who is the examiner, is he not also a fragment who has assumed an authority?’

Seeing myself as fragmented leads me to wonder, what is it to be whole then, and can I be whole? Alas, it is only another fragment that asks that question! From my reading and observation of myself and others, it seems that all this is the mischief of the ego, the bundle of thoughts and memories that keeps attaching itself to different desires. ‘What I must do’ at any given time is a tussle between competing desires that are all pretty self-centred.

Further, Krishnamurti and many others have said that the nature of ego is to separate itself from other people, blinding us to the truth that consciousness is actually one, undivided whole. In other words, it is only a trick of thought that sets me apart as an individual. This insight has struck me from time to time, that the fragmentation within is tied to the fragmentation in the world. Or, in my daily life, that the conflicts I experience with my colleagues and students spring from an internal lack of wholeness that I also experience.

The Whole is Never Really an Addition of Parts

ANANTHA JYOTHI



*The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!*

— *The Pippa's Song*, Robert Browning

Just because everything is in place does not mean that all is well with the world; yet, 'Pippa's Song' is one of hope. The nearest experience to this is the Covid. That March, all students and most staff had already gone home. The school looked desolate and fear was rife in the air. A pall of gloom had spread all over the world. I vividly remember that evening when the fragrance of neem flowers just blossoming filled the air. It reminded me that the spring was here and the new year (Telugu) was dawning. It was an inexplicable moment—one felt a glimmer of hope. The worst was yet to unravel but the kernel of hope was alive. Covid brought out the best and worst of mankind. Almost every household held a tragic tale; but every day you also heard a story that ascertained your faith in humanity. One such story was that of a mother who went on a long solo scooter journey across states to bring her son home from college. It is this kind of synergy that makes our otherwise fractured lives meaningful and almost whole. It always brings these lines alive:

*To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.*

— *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Bysshe Shelley

There is an old Cherokee tale of a grandfather telling his grandson The Tale of Two Wolves where a fight goes on between a dark wolf and a light wolf inside all of us. The dark one is evil—anger, hurt, envy ... while the light one is good—joy, peace, kindness... The grandson queries as to which wolf wins. The grandfather answers: ‘Whichever wolf you feed’. The story does not end there. Grandfather goes on to explain that if you feed them both, they both win. He says: ‘You see, the Light wolf needs the Dark wolf at his side. To feed only one would starve the other and they will become uncontrollable. To feed and care for both means they will serve you well and do nothing that is not a part of something greater, something good, something of life ...How you choose to interact with the opposing forces within you will determine your life. Starve one or the other or guide them both.’

Many faiths advocate the purging of passions to attain the whole. However, I favour the Cherokee tale which teaches you to navigate your passions instead of avoiding them, however turbulent they may be. Only by understanding the turbulence can one attain balance. Being whole is then mostly a balancing act.

On Wholeness

VENKATESH ONKAR



There is a longing to be whole, to be at rest inwardly, free of contradiction. But is this *wholeness* one more *idea* in the flow of our consciousness, an idea which actually keeps us fixed in the loop of restless searching for wholeness?

I cannot positively say what wholeness might mean. But I do have a lot of inner information on the *lack* of wholeness, on fragmentation! The source of this fragmentation, K would say, is thought, which includes conditioned emotion. I think all day, and thought seems fragmentary and contradictory in its essence. When confronted by a real situation, thought wanders off into alternative universes; after fulfilling a desire, it reaches for a different one, generally unattainable; the world is generally experienced by thought as unsatisfactory. Thinking compares the present with the past and projects innumerable fears about the future. Contradictory desires can lead to paralysis in daily life. In the final analysis, thinking convinces us that there is a 'me' (hasn't thought created this me with its ceaseless inner narratives and battles?) which is at threat in a hostile universe, divided from the universe. In a perverse twist, thinking further convinces us that it—thought itself—is the medicine against this division. If only we think enough, and correctly enough, we will be safe and *whole!* Perhaps, when we have played the thought-and-conditioned-emotion game long enough, we may come to the deep understanding that thought creates fragmentary realities.

The act of looking provides respite from fragmentation and opens a door. I can look at, or sense, the so-called outer world: colour, shape, texture, smell, space, distance. A moment of actual sensing can bring relief

from endless fragmented realities. Then, looking at thought itself, at the contradictory worlds it creates, and seeing its essence, also seems to provide respite from fragmentation. In looking, I may glimpse the fragmentation in a non-conceptual way. At least at that instant of the glimpse, I may be free from it. Immersion in thought-emotion can't allow even for this glimpse.

Until, of course, I make *looking* into another concept, and the merry-go-round begins again.

A Tryst with the Banyan Tree

RAJASREE SEN*



*Through ignorance
I once imagined I was bound.
But I am pure awareness.
I live beyond all distinctions,
In unbroken meditation.
Indeed
I am neither bound, nor free.*

—*The Heart of Awareness, a Translation of the Ashtavakra Gita*, Thomas Byron

As I walk past the banyan tree, in what would be a part of a diurnal routine, I decide to sit down. Class 12 music practicals is on; the music wafting through the whole of the Art Village, alongside the beautiful winter morning weather, makes it all seem dreamy. I try and get ready to initiate my daily conversation with the tree, when with a start, I realize a young boy is perched high upon it, his silhouette blending in totality with the tree!

Surprise, shock, disbelief—a multitude of thoughts race through me in an instant. I shout out, ‘Please be careful, that is pretty high up!’ Reply: ‘I am used

to it; I climb a lot of boulders where I come from.’ Another thought resurfaces, this is a ‘holy tree’, we don’t put our feet upon it, let alone climb up on it and be perched so comfortably up there. There is a slight feeling of irritation too, I notice, and I repeat, ‘Please, be careful!’ The self-assurance of all youth retorts, ‘I am very comfortable!’... a moment of silence... the very next moment he declares, ‘You know what? I am coming down!’ ‘Be careful,’ is what I want to shout out, but I hold myself back and wait with bated breath.

The child alights, walks upslope and comes straight to me with a kind of familiarity, though we have barely

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met a few moments ago. 'I have never experienced what I experienced, I have climbed so many trees, usually fig trees, with the same kind of fruit but...this was different; she seemed so...' 'Grounded, holding tall!' I stepped in when he seemed to be fumbling for words. Silence. 'This is supposedly the tree that Krishnamurti saw when he decided to accept this land to build a School,'; a silent as if acquiescing nod. 'The tree is...' Again that silence. I see that this half-formed declaration is not the assuredness of youth, but of a mind that has experienced something beyond itself!

A magical, humbling moment; who was I to decide that he was not to perch himself upon the tree! I tell him that the tree 'speaks!' His eyes water up, or so I think. Silence. 'What is your name?' Jamie, Miller... What was it?! 'What is your name?' he asks me, and I reply. We walk away but I turn and do a quick thank you to the banyan tree, for the magic that I had just been privy to!

When did I start speaking to—no wait—when did the banyan tree start speaking to me? I really cannot think of any dramatic moment ... I wish I had paid more attention! But speak it did, to my soul—my great friend, my anchor who calms my soul when I just go and stand beneath 'it'. Years ago, I had written a poem to be published in the school magazine; I wonder, was the seed of association planted then, or did we forever know each other? Why do mornings feel incomplete without greeting her (why am

I ascribing a gender? ... let it be!), why do I feel a sense of rootedness just standing below her?

As I was walking back to the staff room, one young colleague was staring out of the window, blankly: 'Isn't today surreal—the weather, the trees—all of it!' I nod silently and walk into the staffroom, and sit down to write; something in me wants to capture it all.

How often have I felt 'loved' by the tree? Love, beauty, goodness are all the same, says Krishnamurti. One cannot fall in love; one can only be love. Truly it is all about love, not the one springing from fear, loneliness, bigoted desires but something profound, more intense; there seems to be a big enveloping hug holding it all just like the Banyan tree is flanking it all.

Kabir says, '*Haman hai ishq mastana, haman ko hoshiyaare kya, rahe azad ya jag se, haman duniya se yaari kya.*' Loosely translated, it says: my love is a state of maddening joy, there isn't any need to go the worldly way, let me always be free of this world, what is my friendship with this world!

Love is truly synonymous with freedom from desire, from fear; surely what has one to lose anyway? Freedom, without thought and desire, is empty of every man-made thing. Love means that vast limitless space, and where there is space, there is silence and energy. The eternal, the nameless. There has to be beauty, goodness in living as if it is all that

mattered; no noise, nothing can ruffle the silence, the stillness.

Krishnamurti speaks of that state as one of emptiness, a kind of meditative state where man is living a life of excellence. He strongly appeals to us to just go to the 'other shore', the only clue he gives is to be in a state of nothingness, to have a meditative mind, to be living a life of intelligence that has nothing to do with cleverness or the machinations of the mind. Only in such a state of being can one get a glimpse of the other shore, the so-called 'holy'.

If we accept the challenge and pause, then perhaps most of us will agree that sometimes when we are truly in the 'meditative state,' we feel intense love and compassion. We must have noticed that life then seems to acquire a new meaning. For instance, what was a mere job, perhaps a stop-gap arrangement, soon becomes all-consuming. Something happens in the interim period that one can barely sum up in words—moments of sheer bliss, clear insight, suddenly veils of the past lifting up—answers to deep questions seem to be coming up and touching recesses of the soul, life surely seems blessed then!

What began as a passion perhaps becomes more deep-rooted in philosophy, arts, poetry, singing, academics, greenery; everything adds up and seems to touch the soul. The job then becomes a kind of life, a way of living. Blessings seem to be coming in every moment. Teaching, learning, interacting, informing, being

informed, all keep on happening simultaneously. Life then surely acquires a new meaning, a new purpose. Academics or the 'real', the rigour, the schedule, associated fears, all become moments of 'seeing.' The so-called real, daily living perhaps then becomes the sublime, the holy, the most sacred. In that perhaps one gets to see the heavens, not little man-made heavens.

One is left wondering: those moments of conversation with the tree, heart-touching deep insights, deep knowing, deep connection, intense turmoil, compassion, love, what seemed as a silent blessing—was it the answer to one's search for something 'beyond the material'? Whatever it was or is, one stands humbled!

The Buddha's friend and first disciple, Ananda, once remarked to his master that, 'Half the holy life, O master, is friendship with the beautiful, association with the beautiful, communion with the beautiful.' To this, the Buddha replied, 'Say not so, Ananda, say not so. It is not half the holy life. It is the whole of the holy life.'

Explorations into Learning and Living

PRABHA CHAITANYA*



What enables learning? When there is a natural rhythm or flow to life there may be a conducive environment for learning. What then is a natural rhythm in the context of living our daily lives? A feeling of oneness, perhaps, along with a careful listening to the cues and subtle directions that nature and human interactions provide us. To some of us this may seem rather abstract. Let us see how to unravel it.

Certain questions that emerge in this regard:

1. Is life meant to move in a certain predetermined way? Are we disrupting what should naturally play out, due to the interference of what we 'think' should take place (given that a pattern has already been established in society)?
2. What if one must do certain things irrespective of this natural flow (which could imply moving in a direction contrary to the flow)?
3. What is the place of thought?
4. Where and when does one feel most at ease?
5. What place does earning a livelihood (for an adult) or completing one's course of study (for a child) hold in our life?

Free will

From the first two questions, there emerges a broader question of free will vs destiny. Is there such a thing as free will or are we tethered and allowed just enough room to live within a certain radius? When then does the scope for exercising free will broaden? Does it broaden at all or is it a false notion we live with?

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A careful examination of our own lives gives us a view of how our responsibilities and must-do lists result in an inability to cross a certain line or boundary. A further examination will probably reveal that such a situation may not be permanent. It is a dynamic process which might change. Are we always aware of this shift or change?

One falls into a pattern of living, conforming and fulfilling what we believe must be done. When we have the room to manoeuvre, we may fail to recognize the sudden space that has been given. Do we falsely attribute permanence to everything when in fact nothing is permanent?

What is a ‘natural flow’?

When I say ‘natural flow’ of our life, it implies a sense of oneness with everything around, creating a harmonious and rhythmic living with all beings and nature itself. Are we living in tune with this natural flow? It is a two-way process—we listen attentively and live out in consonance with all other elements. And all other elements and beings, too, live in such a fashion. Such living may not necessarily be without conflict or differences, but it won’t be a product of an artificial imposition. Rather it would be an event that was inevitable.

What has been illustrated above is an ideal scenario of course. Very often we are trapped in our own web of ideas, thoughts, insecurities and a variety of tugs that distance us from this sense of oneness. One loses touch with the natural flow and moves in a direction which causes pain to oneself and to other beings or nature. This could possibly result in chaos.

Hindrances to the flow

Let us explore what could interrupt this natural flow of things.

The one potential hindrance is ‘thought’ itself. What is the place of ‘thought’ in our life? From where and why does a thought emanate in any given situation? There are outside influences from within our own family, friends, colleagues, students and the external world which constantly feeds us information. This feed happens through the gateways in the human body—which enable sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and so on.

Whether we believe in any elaborate philosophy of human reincarnation or not, it is undeniable that we are a product of a variety of influences (even within a single lifetime). Our thought process constantly comes in contact with the external feed of information. This leads to the arising of desires, fears and a whole range of emotions. One is thrown into a world

of confusion where one can't tell if one's desires, opinions and emotions are even real. Do we simply mimic what our social group does or wants? If so, why? This is a common question for teenagers but an equally potent question for adults.

What kind of importance have we placed on 'thought' whose source we have not even questioned in the first place?

How does clarity emerge?

A related question is whether a certain distancing from the social environment enables clarity in thinking. Does affiliation, and the need to conform, throw us into a whirlpool of habit and routine? There is no denying that we all need support in various aspects of our life. We have built relationships over decades, some of which are sanctified through a religious process.

How do we stand in relation to those commitments? Can we yet not be afraid to see things the way they are? Are we scared of losing what we know as 'our world'? How does one be a part of the world yet remain absolutely aware of what's going on within? And thereafter, act from that place of clarity?

To understand what enables learning; some reflection on these issues is important. We have so far touched upon free will, a natural flow, hindrances to it such as thought and external influences, and clarity in thinking.

From clarity to learning

I wonder if further elaboration is required on how learning becomes possible. One can see one's own thoughts and external influences on a regular basis. One begins to see where one's thoughts emerge from, making us aware of the hindrances.

On the positive side one probably sees, for the first time, what one truly enjoys and what captures one's interest. Looking at life through this lens of day-to-day living opens up many possibilities. Our boundaries and restrictions remain but we are aware of them. Reflection on our own life experiences also reveals that these limitations don't exist forever. For instance, as an educator, I may want to deliver on the curriculum in a certain way, but circumstances make it difficult. Certainly, this situation has the possibility of changing and improving.

One can connect with oneself and see clearly the sources of fear, detrimental habits and unhealthy relationships (to name only a few such factors).

Learning in the case of an adult

A critical mass of people with such clarity can open up numerous possibilities in any organization including in a school. Developing such clarity in some sense is individual work. Yet, in our schools, the emergence of such clarity is a real possibility.

When we acknowledge that these above processes are at work, don't we become more realistic in our expectations of ourselves and others? Perhaps we see that there are differences in the length of experience and knowledge amongst educators just as in students. Our everyday interactions with one another can reveal interests, talents or skills. What comes naturally to one, will be a source of joy and a reason for more learning. Some may want to challenge themselves and embark on uncharted territories.

Just allowing for these differences by entrusting suitable responsibilities may not be sufficient. Creating an environment where our conversations and interactions celebrate the value each person brings on board is critical. Celebration here implies building a culture where differences are not noted. Each person naturally slides into the area where they belong and there need be no further discussion, analysis or articulation on the matter.

Comparisons can cease when we recognize no two people are alike. This of course, is an ideal scenario, and yet it is a possibility.

Learning in the case of a child

Taking an example of how learning happens in the case of an individual child, we speak of originality of thought, creativity and self-expression. However, very often we place emphasis on the very things that deny these. When we expect that children build their knowledge through accumulation of facts, we naturally turn them away from exploring without name, word, definitions or form. Why should one know the names of famous books, or even read them, if the very purpose of reading them is unclear? Am I going to quote from that book, impress an audience, my friends, or is that information helping me build a view of the world and understand it better? Is that book doing something personally for me—igniting a line of thought or exposing me to a new world?

To continue with the example stated above—what happens then if I can't recollect facts from the book which to me are insignificant? Is the purpose to get together with a group of people to discuss something (by relying on facts from various sources) or is the purpose to explore things

to build my own understanding and possibly make more informed decisions? Books, material and resources are but a means to elevate my understanding and not to applaud myself on how much I know. We often miss the subtle distinction. This example makes us ask a question: why do we learn? The answer to this question will reveal if learning can truly be continuous and unhindered.

Does learning have a purpose? Should it have a purpose?

If the reader is able to appreciate the connections made thus far, it will emerge that any activity probably leads to *sustained* learning and self-growth only if it doesn't have any material benefit in view. By material benefit we could mean knowing a large number of facts and an expectation of validation from the world for such knowledge. In most cases such a build-up of knowledge leads to a false sense of pride and self-aggrandizement. Learning with an end in view might be inevitable in certain circumstances. But what if it becomes the reason for *all learning*?

What about learning for the joy of it? What does it do to a person in comparison to one who learns only with an end in view? Does the latter not limit learning? Do I restrict learning to only schoolwork? What about learning about myself, about people, relationships and everything else that encompasses life?

A larger question

If we would like to focus on the real intent of education, which is to build a continuous and uninterrupted capacity to learn, one needs to carefully examine 'the self', be it the educator or the student. To learn about our motivations, desires, fears, personal challenges, personality traits and insecurities, just to name a few aspects. The whole process of being aware of the natural flow involves 'being aware' of these in the first place.

Back to the flow and learning

I come back to 'flow'. Our own life experiences reveal that certain things flow well but certain things don't. It can then be deduced that for some students learning or understanding flows rather smoothly and for some others it doesn't. Most of us become aware of this and adapt ourselves quickly to the situation, dealing with each child quite differently. I state this as an example to corroborate the case for recognizing this natural flow and staying in tune with it. When things hit a roadblock, can we pause, ask a few questions, pause again and let it ease out over time?

Can we then recognize that both educators and children need this space equally? Can we allow people to take up suitable roles without imposing a predetermined template? Can we allow people to teach and learn in their own styles, naturally progressing along their individual learning curves? Can we be patient? Can we allow them the space to learn as they move along, with that natural flow? This I believe, will organically create a harmonious space for living and learning.

To sum up, the article suggests:

- A natural flow enables learning.
- Such a natural flow might be hindered by the lack of free will. There is scope for free will to broaden over the course of time.
- Other hindrances to the natural flow could be thought and external influences.
- Heightening the level of awareness to the source of these hindrances could aid a natural flow.
- A certain distancing from the social environment might be required to see clearly the source of hindrances. Clarity plays a vital role.
- Sustained learning takes place when there is an innate joy involved.
- Learning becomes possible in recognizing the above processes at work.

Project-Based Learning

Building ideas together

SOUMYA DAS*



Coming from a research background to teaching, I find one of the most notable aspects of Pathashaala to be its emphasis on project-based learning—where students gain hands-on experience with academic concepts, making learning a deeply immersive process.

We all carry ideas within us and want to see change in the world, whether it is finding more sustainable ways to live or solving everyday challenges. However, as students, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application can be challenging. That is why Pathashaala nurtures a space where students do not just learn concepts but apply them to create something meaningful.

For classes 5–8, we introduced *Seed of an Idea*, which, as the name suggests, nurtures the sparks of curiosity that arise in young minds. The questions they ask while walking to their learning spaces or

the dining hall—Why are leaves suddenly turning yellow this time of year? Can water be used more sustainably? How can water be purified and used for daily chores? Why is there excessive plastic waste; can we do something about it? Can we make a paper plane that flies longer? It is scorching today; is there a DIY way to cool down the room?—become the starting points for projects that merge learning with exploration.

While students have intriguing ideas, they may struggle to persist long enough to find answers, as their curious minds swiftly move on to new questions. This is where good facilitation plays a crucial role. They are guided to stay with their questions, prompted with further questions that help unravel their thoughts. Structured steps keep them engaged, especially when they see real-world applications; they are more likely to persist if they can connect their learning to how things actually work.

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After the success of *Seed of an Idea*, we extended the initiative to senior school students last year, introducing *Ignite, Innovate, Inspire*, following up on a proposal I made in this regard. This platform allows senior students to take on more intricate projects that require deeper research, creativity, and knowledge beyond their curriculum. They explore various concepts in practice and apply theories to working models and solutions. Some examples include developing an atmospheric water generator, analyzing how advertisements impact a company's profit, designing accessible storage solutions for visually impaired individuals, building RC (remote controlled) cars, and experimenting with the chemiluminescent chemical luminol's reaction with iron.

I have largely facilitated these projects, with the help of other teachers. When students approach me with a question, my role as a facilitator is to guide them through the following steps:

1. Understanding the intention:
The first step is to articulate the reason behind choosing a topic. Identifying the specific interest and the problem being addressed ensures a clear purpose and motivation to persist with the project.
2. Breaking down the question:
Deconstructing the idea into manageable parts allows for reflection and refinement.

Structuring the thought process helps create a clear plan for exploration.

3. Researching: Gathering relevant information provides a strong foundation for the project. This could involve collecting data for an economics-related study, exploring electrical circuits for a physics experiment, or studying chemical reactions for a chemistry investigation.
4. Developing a practical approach: Applying the acquired knowledge in an experimental setting or implementing original ideas brings the concepts to life. Whether testing bacteria growth, designing a prototype, or setting up an experiment, this stage transforms theoretical learning into tangible outcomes.
5. Communicating their findings: Presenting the process and conclusions in a structured manner ensures clarity for different audiences, from junior students to teachers. Expressing insights effectively strengthens communication skills while inspiring others to think creatively and independently.

Sample projects

A student worked on predicting exchange rates. After understanding her intention, I asked these questions one by one as she progressed with her project: What

factors affect exchange rates? How do you plan to find data for these factors? How will you organize and analyze this data? How do you build a model based on the collected information? How do you check if your model is accurate? How does this entire process relate to your academic curriculum and global economic trends?

Another student worked on building a drone. He began with a simple yet profound question—how do I make a small machine fly? This led him to explore motors, sensors, electrical circuits, and programming using Arduino. Assembling the drone required applying physics, debugging code, troubleshooting hardware, and refining the design, turning it into a holistic, hands-on learning experience.

Similarly, an ambitious experiment on using biotic factors for dry-waste management began with identifying worms that could potentially digest plastic. How do we confirm that the worm is truly digesting plastic and not merely shredding it? If the plastic decomposes, is it due to microbial action or the worm itself? What happens if the worm ingests plastic but cannot digest it? Would that be harmful to the organism? These questions drove scientific experimentation and meaningful discoveries.

This project-based approach to learning has allowed not only our students but also interested learners from other schools to participate in in-person as well as online (during COVID) *Kondattams*

(celebratory learning sessions), which have been hosted by Pathashaala for twelve years now. The *Sustainability Symposia* organized and anchored by Senior School for the past three years has also built on this possibility with other schools. Recognizing the significance of hands-on learning and real-world engagement, we explored further opportunities to enhance project-based education.

During the peak of COVID in 2020, we discovered the potential of hybrid learning at Pathashaala. A large number of resident teachers lived and worked from the school in a primarily online mode, while also experiencing first-hand the deep learning opportunities provided by the school's autonomous use of natural resources. To keep the spirit of project-based learning alive, our Principal proposed *The Courtyard School* in 2020. It is a hybrid space of inquiry-based learning, a way to utilize Pathashaala's unique environmental and pedagogic design for students' project-based questions and initiatives across schools.

Now, after Pathashaala's recovery from the COVID years, there is space again to take this idea forward, albeit on a small scale. It offers plus-two level students a unique opportunity to step beyond textbooks and dedicate time—whether a day or a week, in person or online—to work on a project, evolve an idea, or engage with sustainable technologies.

Questions remain: is a project a sufficiently anchored way to help students

persist with their long-term interests? Or, as we sometimes wonder, do questions really get addressed, let alone answered, by projects or does 'way lead on to way'? One truth that sometimes emerges from our review discussions is that in the welter of 'doing', much that was valuable in the thinking, 'the soul of a question', can wash away. Much depends on the facilitation.

Project-based learning is not just about completing assignments; it is about building ideas together. It is about asking questions, persisting, and refining

with them, embracing and learning from failures, things that don't work, iterating on possible solutions, and seeing learning as a continuous journey. By navigating challenges, engaging with new information, and experimenting with different approaches, students develop resilience and confidence. They learn that setbacks are not obstacles but stepping stones toward deeper understanding. As they take ownership of their learning, academics ceases to be just a requirement and become a transformative process, one where curiosity fuels discovery.

The Process of a Neighbourhood Study

An interdisciplinary approach

AJIN THOMAS AND TARUN SURI*



Background and intent

As schoolteachers we are often looking to create learning contexts that draw from real world situations, not just simulations of them, or even abstract learning left to extrapolation with examples in the classroom. It therefore makes sense to have flexible institutional structures and a curricular framework to accommodate such planned learning experiences. Annually curated field trips or study trips largely help fulfil this purpose, among others. Another such opportunity presents itself in the form of academic projects, through which subject or theme-specific projects lead to valuable exploration of different spaces and people that we may encounter. Field based projects not only have the possibility to enrich our learning by adding nuance to teaching in classrooms, but they also allow for first-hand experience and learning that bring forth complexities, often beyond the academic framework.

The Class 11 program at The School KFI is a rich mix of such trips and other activities that orient and sensitize students towards larger questions around society. The broad intent of this particular interdisciplinary study (attempted with twelve students of Sociology and Environmental Science in Class 11), was as follows: (a) to connect students and teachers, emotionally and intellectually, to a given area that is being studied; (b) to have an immersive experience; (c) to get to know our own neighbourhood; (d) identify patterns being observed and connect them to secondary readings/research.

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Our attempt was to conceptualize, plan and execute an area study systematically. For this, we had to pick a suitable study site.

Choosing a study area

Proximity was the primary factor influencing our choice for the study, as it is the essence of what we mean by neighbourhood. Hence life around the school became the subject of the study. Next, it had to necessarily support the intersection of the two academic disciplines of Sociology and Environmental Science with which the respective teachers and students were involved. The two fields of research are inevitably intertwined, i.e., any region or area selected would equally yield to the study of sociological and ecological contexts. The nearby Siruseri Lake area made an ideal, visible and conventional intersection of both human and environmental aspects.

An additional point of interest in the study site came from the fact that the Thazhambur and Siruseri region, the location of the school and the lake respectively, is a fast-developing peri-urban region. The area has seen dramatic changes in the last two decades owing to the establishment and expansion of the SIPCOT IT Park, just a few kilometres to the north of the lake. Thus, the need for us, as concerned neighbours and stakeholders, was to understand this change and what it means to different inhabitants.

Preparation by the teachers

The two teachers, who were primarily guiding this project, had studied the lake environment in an informal manner in the past, engaging in photography, walking, swimming, etc. Additional visits made to the lake and the surrounding settlements helped widen the scope of the study and the possible issues that we may encounter. The resource people identified for the study were:

- A person from Pitchandikulam Forest, Auroville, who had been working for a year with the local community, actively helping in the restoration of the lake together with an NGO.
- An urban designer-cum-architect (founder of the Urban Design Collective), who had done a six-month-long study along with Pitchandikulam Forest, on the lake, and the people around, at the same time.
- A local resident who has been actively working for the welfare of the *Irula* community.
- An associate from Care Earth Trust, an organization that works with ecological restoration.

Relevant reading material was gathered from these resource people. Additionally, teachers also put together articles around related concepts of ‘commons’ and ‘access to resources’ to help sensitize students to issues, supplement conceptual understanding and broaden the scope of the study. Both reading material and resource people were introduced to the team at the beginning to allow for open observation and conversations during our initial visits.

Introduction to students

The introductory session began with the subject teachers sharing their personal connection with the lake and its surroundings and why they thought this particular area might offer a good learning ground. This was followed by a discussion on the necessity to engage with and understand our neighbourhood. Students were then encouraged to articulate how they would like to understand this chosen space, and what specifically they would like to do as a part of this process.

Some students took time to warm up to the idea, others were immediately enthusiastic. The initial discussion yielded to deeper thinking about the place and what it could potentially offer. Students expressed their interest in spending time in the area, talking to people, conducting interviews, and meeting experts in the field. The introduction was followed by two more student-driven sessions, to come up with a concrete sequence of events. The teachers facilitated the sessions by helping streamline processes, raising questions and letting students become aware of logistical constraints.

Observations from the field

Over six visits, each of them about three to four hours long, students and teachers went on quiet walks, observed the area, and conversed with individuals living and working in the area. The attempt was also to visit the places and people time and again, so that we become familiar to them and vice versa. From the initial three visits and conversations, we came upon questions that could be probed further with the help of research. Students discussed these questions in groups and addressed them to a resource person who visited school and spent time with us. Students’ research questions were classified into the following thematic titles:

- Governance
- Health and wellbeing
- Inequalities and communities

- Access to resources
- Ecology and the environment

To understand the research questions better, students worked on specific interview questions that could be asked to people during field work, and three more field visits were organized. The third among these visits was to various facilities in the area—the panchayat (local government) office, the ration shop, a government school, a nursery, and a health clinic. This visit provided our exploration with an institutional perspective.

These trips, which included observations and interviews, presented us with several challenges and possibilities. Among these was the challenge of getting students to warm up to the place and people and making the people there comfortable with a group of ‘outsiders’ asking to converse with them. We were able to see the many ways in which the field visits enriched and challenged the concepts we were learning in class. Across the days of field visits, teachers encouraged students to focus on the following skills: (a) non-intrusive observation and taking field notes; (b) having open-ended conversations with people; (c) coming up on research questions of interest to pursue further; (d) preparing questionnaires directed towards these research questions. This meant going to the field with much respect and receptivity, but also some scepticism.

After the field visits, individual field notes were formally transcribed and shared with others in the group. This pooled information made it possible for all to borrow data from each other and fit in missing pieces as required. It was interesting for teachers to be amidst a group of students discussing and critically cross-examining their transcribed notes. This led to identifying biases and brought different perspectives to each observation. Discussions also reflected contradictions in what different stakeholders had said about a particular thing; the process of attempting to infer reality from these statements proved insightful. It is important to note that information around political exploits, power and caste dynamics sometimes took centre stage during some of these discussions. Students and teachers were thus encouraged to perceive biases that may reside in the people spoken to as well as among the study team.

Students were also asked to independently substantiate, contrast or dig deeper into observations made in the field with the help of secondary reading and research. The study, along with an introduction, the intent, process, observations, inferences and discussions about their questions, referencing

primary and secondary information would then be formally documented in the form of a written booklet.

The prolonged engagement with the project between June 2024 and January 2025 was interspersed with project related reading, trips, input sessions from resource people and discussions to sustain student and teacher enthusiasm. To move the project to a constructive completion, we have been considering the possibility of sharing our exploration and findings back with the community.

Some learnings and observations

Possibilities and questions

- As students and teachers of a school, what are the ways in which findings of a project such as this can be taken back to the field and to the people? Do we have an ethical/moral responsibility to do so?
- Research is often looked at as an individual process—something that each person has to do for themselves. How would it look like if the information gathered was shared with the whole group—so that a more wholesome knowledge-gathering is possible?
- We found each student leveraging their capacities to contribute—language, drawing, conversation skills, etc. Could trips have been structured or planned, keeping in mind these capacities?
- People we meet in the field may become valuable resource persons for the school.

Appropriate group size

- The small size of the group (twelve students) allowed for two teachers to comfortably keep track of things, ensure the safety of the dispersed sub-groups (consisting of two or three students) and have different conversations during field trips.
- The group size also helped teachers work with students individually to refine various aspects of their engagement with the project.
- It is also important to note that a group size that is too small (or too large) may not yield to vibrant discussion, with multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives being brought to the table.

Support from others

- Despite some challenges in scheduling the project related events among the many other events conducted for Class 11 students, the cooperation

and support of other teachers across subjects and sections of school helped.

- A flexible institutional structure that encourages teachers and students to explore such possibilities is something we were privileged to have.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the time that the various people we met on the field took time off from their daily lives and work to spend with us in conversation. A special mention of gratitude is due to the following people: Anuviya Anbuselvam from Pitchandikulam Forest, Auroville; Jayashree Vencatesh and Anjana Vencatesh from Care Earth Trust; Vidhya Mohankumar from the Urban Design Collective. We thank them for sharing their time, knowledge, and experiences with us.

Between the River and the Trees

An ode to a college by the riverside

ALKA SINGH AND RACHANA PANDEY*



Transition from school to college

One fine day, a group of students with fresh faces but a little bewildered, clearly anxious, were sitting in an open classroom near the riverside area. Perhaps they were the newly admitted students. They became quiet, very quiet, simply watching the river in front.

'What are you looking at?'

'Nothing', one of them responded.

But the 'nothing' contained silence, depth and a sense of being one with the surroundings.

For these newly admitted students, the transition—physical, mental, emotional— from school to college involves adapting to major changes and new experiences. Entering the main gate of the college with apprehension and anticipation, they soon discover a strange familiarity and connection with this place. They get a taste of freedom in their movement, attire, and space. It is a stepping-stone to explore what it is that they really want in life. As they spend a considerable amount of time on the campus of Vasanta College for Women, a tremendous change visibly happens. They develop a bond with the place which remains with them forever.

A few months later, a slightly agitated voice was heard that was clearly unhappy:

'Why are you cutting this tree?'

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'Why are you cutting such an old and huge tree?' Another raised voice could be heard.

In a few minutes, a number of students gathered around the tree with concern. They were deeply upset. Not being satisfied with the response of the carpenters and workers, they went to the principal. The usual emotion evoked by 'Principal's Office' was momentarily lost in the heat of anguish and their genuine last-minute effort to stop the cutting of the tree. In this was clearly visible the impact that this place already had on them.

In fact, several efforts had been taken up by the college to save the old neem tree between the Psychology Department and the basketball court. It was completely damaged by termites from inside and its trunk was totally hollow despite looking huge. It could fall any moment and that was a huge safety concern. When the matter was explained to them, they accepted it but with some unhappiness. This old neem tree has been etched in the memories of many students for decades. Soon, a few benches were created for the students by using the logs of the same tree so that the essence and existence of the tree remains on the campus. 'Old gives way to the new'. This did not really register; but it was accepted.

These new students' responses came as a happy surprise. They had become aware of the nature around, had a sense of belonging towards nature's plenty; and were also cognizant of man's disruptive activities against its natural order. Students cannot be passive and blind towards their surroundings; rather, they must be observant and responsible towards their environment. Hence, it is crucial to have an education with emphasis on freedom and a close bonding with nature. This helps one to observe oneself and examine one's relation with the world. When there is observation, reflection, introspection and self-exploration, they are less likely to be inclined towards violence and hatred. This incident of an old neem tree, the students' bonding with it, their fearless questioning and yet being open to dialogue—suggests that they are now part of this space that strives to create a non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, open-ended atmosphere.

The Vasanta College campus is rooted in this idea of freedom—freedom from fear, authority, and the psychological constructs that condition the mind. The students' participation in the classroom sessions and activities helps them to realize the importance of being able to take their own decisions. Transition from school to college is a movement from 'spoon feeding' to 'self-understanding'—from the rigid protocol of most schools

today to an open-ended environment where they are free to explore the world and themselves. Knowledge is necessary for functional purposes, which the students today are well aware of. But true understanding comes from self-enquiry and direct perception rather than intellectual accumulation or adherence to any dogma. The degree acquired with the accumulated knowledge of individuals comes with its own baggage and conditioning. On the other hand, there is no pre-requisite for awareness and wisdom. Simply watching an action, as in observing a bird making her nest or flying back to its nest before sunset, is enough to create a consciousness about it. Conflict arises perhaps when one does not observe, listen or pay attention. This entire movement from school to college, with its challenges and new possibilities, is soon internalized by students in their own special ways.

A brief history of Vasanta College

Vasanta College for Women, situated in the serene surroundings of Rajghat, Varanasi, stands as a living embodiment of Annie Besant's vision. Nestled along the banks of the river Ganga, the institution blends its principles of education with the spiritual and ecological significance of its location. The river, revered as a source of life and inspiration, amplifies the college's ethos, creating a unique space where learning and nature coexist harmoniously. Notably, Vasanta College for Women was established on 7 July 1913, by Dr Annie Besant, a leading figure of the Indian National Movement. It started as the Theosophical Collegiate School for Boys and Theosophical Collegiate School for Girls in the Theosophical Society campus, Varanasi. On the establishment of the Society for Promotion of National Education (SPNE) in 1917, the names of both schools were changed to Theosophical National School for Boys and Girls, Banaras. It was affiliated to the National University, Adyar, Chennai. The Girls School became a High School in 1920 and an Intermediate College in 1922 and these were known as Theosophical National Girls School and Women's College, Banaras. Since 1923, the schools and colleges sent students to the Allahabad University for examinations and later from 1948 to Banaras Hindu University. When the Rishi Valley Trust was founded in 1928, these institutions were transferred to this trust. In 1940s the girls college came to be known as the Vasanta College for Women as a mark of gratitude to Dr Annie Besant, the founder of the College. The college offered BA programmes and the first batch of eight girls appeared in the BA examination as regular students for the first time in 1948.

Vasanta College for Women was shifted to its present campus of Rajghat on the banks of river Ganga in 1954. Its current geographical location at the confluence of rivers Ganga and Varuna has a unique historical significance. Rajghat happens to be the oldest inhabited site in Varanasi, dating back to eighth century BC. The area of Rajghat has a spiritual, intellectual and historical heritage of its own. Buddha is said to have walked through this land on his way to deliver his first sermon at Sarnath. Moreover, the place has been blessed by the presence and intense philosophical dialogues of Sri J Krishnamurti.

The river in the life of the college

The river Ganga and Vasanta College for Women have been inseparable. In the fond reminiscences of every alumna of the college, this bond is indissoluble. The adjective 'riverside' is an obvious and unique feature of the college, which makes it stand apart as an academic institute existing in an ecologically conscious environment where the sense of connection with nature naturally develops without being forced. From time to time, teachers and students take a self-guided tour on the path known as the K Trail by the side of the river line to the south—from the college to the downhill fields on the north side and back again. This not only develops their observation skills and the ability to use all their senses by seeing, listening, feeling, but also connects them with the soil and their surroundings. Significantly, when students take such walks, it captures their attention and reduces their screen time as well. The students often say that this place occupies a special place in their hearts, carrying a sense of familiarity and belongingness. 'Oh, the riverside college, known for its serene environment, academic excellence and legacy'.

The river Ganga holds unrivalled cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance in India. Flowing through the heart of Varanasi, the river serves as a milieu for the pursuit of knowledge and self-awareness. Beyond its spiritual significance, the Ganga is a lifeline for millions. It symbolizes interconnectedness, as its waters flow through diverse terrains, connecting people and ecosystems. In the context of Vasanta College for Women, the river represents the flow of knowledge, the continuity of tradition, the coexistence of tradition and modernity and also the transformative power of education. The presence of the river further emphasizes the bonding and harmony between human existence and nature, which is as old as civilization itself.

The flowing river serves as a living classroom: its ripples, the splashing of the waves, the rise and fall of the waters, teaching the lessons of life, to go ahead in life and never to stop.

Student 1: Can our life flow as smoothly and consistently as the river?

Student 2: It too at times is turbulent.

Student 1: Very seldom, but our life is mostly in turmoil?

Student 3: Does it not depend on how you perceive it?

Student 1: It's not about perception—we are facing it.

Student 2: So, can we face it without getting disturbed? Can we remain calm in turbulent situations too and just observe it silently ...

The river's calm yet powerful flow serves as a metaphor for life's journey, encouraging introspection, resilience and humility. The emphasis on harmony with nature resonates with contemporary efforts to address environmental degradation. By fostering a sense of responsibility towards the Ganga and other natural resources, the College contributes to the local and global movements for sustainability and peace. Krishnamurti's focus on self-awareness and inner peace provides valuable insights for managing stress and anxiety in today's competitive world. An understanding of oneself by seeking balance and clarity paves a pathway to mental and emotional well-being.

Sitting by the Ganga, one might feel a resonance with K's idea of observing life without judgment. The river's eternal flow echoes his insistence on living fully in the present moment—unburdened, unguided by any kind of learning from elsewhere. The effort to inculcate enquiry-based learning where students explore questions rather than accept what they are told; to prepare them for a world full of doubts, anxieties, speculations that culminates in a sojourn of exploration to understand the disorder within. By the tranquil Ganga, one could observe one's thoughts, emotions, and reactions without judgment and with clarity. Through such observation, individuals could unearth the conditioning that limits their minds. Self-knowledge brings clarity, and clarity leads to freedom. Sitting under the shadow of towering trees by the Ganga, engaged in various dialogues in open air classes, one is reminded of Krishnamurti's analogy of education as the cultivation of the mind, much like nurturing a garden. He proposed that education must awaken intelligence and creativity, helping individuals

to question with a sense of awareness, and develop their own capacity for independent thinking.

Once, for a regular security check in the college, a uniformed officer was talking to the students. He asked, 'What are the problems that you face outside the college as well as within the premises?'

'There is no problem, Sir! Our problems are dealt with by ourselves. We know how to deal with it.' The student responded.

A guiding philosophy in a changing world

The principles of Dr Besant and Krishnamurti are integrated into the educational approach of the College, aiming to provide education that fosters intellectual, emotional, and ethical growth. In our modern education system, the focus often remains on acquiring technical skills and knowledge to compete in the job market. However, education must address fundamental questions about life, death, relationships, and the meaning of existence. In doing so, it becomes a tool for individual and societal transformation and that probably is the kind of education that K talks about. At Rajghat, students and faculty are immersed in an environment conducive to introspection and holistic learning. This educational philosophy offers a blueprint for integrating traditional wisdom with modern learning methodologies. For instance, under NEP 2020, a set of value-added courses are offered to the newly admitted undergraduate students, such as 'Ayurveda' and 'Yoga', and also 'Environmental Science' and 'Educational Vision of J Krishnamurti'. The curriculum thus encourages students to question, explore, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their surroundings. In an age dominated by technology, competition and consumerism, the teachings on simplicity, awareness, and holistic education offer a much-needed counterbalance. Questioning is emphasized over conforming and this resonates with students grappling with existential dilemmas in a fast-paced, information-saturated world.

'... the computers can take over all that the man is doing...almost. The computers cannot look at a beautiful tree or at the evening star, single and alone in the sky, or at the morning light on the waters'.¹

In an era marked by distractions and information overload, introspection and awareness become more pertinent than ever. It is essential for students to observe and learn from nature. Such observations cultivate awareness, sensitivity, and humility. They also learn the principles of environmental

sustainability and understand the importance of ecological responsibility. Machines and new technologies cannot inquire as deeply as the human mind—they cannot watch or reflect; love or show compassion towards fellow beings. In a non-hierarchical atmosphere, learners step away from the rush, observe the world with fresh eyes, and rediscover their innate curiosity. By prioritizing holistic development, Vasanta College for Women prepares students to navigate the complexities of the modern world with clarity and compassion.

1 'The Future of Humanity in the Age of AI', pg. 6 *The Pathless*, Aug–Nov 2023.

Sholai School in 2025

BRIAN JENKINS*



Editors' note: Sholai School, in Tamil Nadu, is an education centre inspired by Krishnamurti's philosophy. In this interview, Alok Mathur queries its founder, Brian Jenkins, on the origins of the centre and different facets of its educational intent and practices.

When, where and how did Sholai School come into existence?

I came to south India from Britain in the 1980s in a spirit of humility to learn about the ways and lives of the local people here. I was also inclined to create a small school which would be an educational community wherein many activities could take place, and many skills learnt, and where the students would take part in caring for, creating and running the school. With the small inheritance left to me by my grandmother, I began looking for a place in India and found this sylvan seventy-acre valley surrounded by hills, eighteen kilometres from Kodaikanal.

In 1989, Sholai School, the Centre for Learning, Organic Agriculture and Appropriate Technologies (CLOAAT), was created on this beautiful piece of land, biologically diverse, having a wide variety

of hardwood trees along with many coffee bushes, fruit trees and pepper. Being close to the reserve forest, elephant, gaur (Indian Bison), the endangered Malabar giant squirrel and mouse deer and many other wild animals too can be seen. Later we counted 133 species of birds.

Can you share something about yourself and why you started this school?

I grew up in Britain and worked as a schoolteacher to the Kikuyu people of Kenya before studying Social Anthropology at Sussex University. As a young man, I often wondered why there was so much disparity between the rich and the poor. I was greatly moved by the teachings and philosophy of J Krishnamurti. And this led me to become an educator. I joined Brockwood Park, the J Krishnamurti Educational Centre in Britain, and worked there for fourteen years. I enjoyed

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the serious discussions with Krishnamurti, and joined in the dialogues with David Bohm, the well-known scientist, who used to visit Brockwood regularly. I also visited and spent some time in other schools founded by Krishnamurti in India, including Rishi Valley School and the Valley School in Bengaluru. When I expressed a desire to start my own school, Krishnamurti advised me not to create a 'blueprint'. While I do not claim any authority to convey Krishnamurti's vision to others or even to those who worked with me to create Sholai School, I can say that I was much inspired by something Krishnamurti said in 1969:

The School, the Garden, the House, we build together, create together, the whole thing. The moment we form groups within this, we have stopped. The moment I compete with you, it is over... After all, in the relationship between the teacher and the taught, if there is this sense of communication, that is, building together, learning together, then the whole thing changes. That is real communication.

In the beginning, there were two or three teachers, my two children, and nine local children. Later a boy from Ladakh and another from the Gulf joined us, and then the school grew gradually in strength as well as in its infrastructure. I did not have a master plan. First, we converted a small hut into a bedroom with a kitchen and a toilet nearby. Then as our numbers grew, we created a dining room and small classrooms and cottages for the teachers.

Today, the sprawling school campus also includes boys' hostels, girls' hostels, the library, a recycling room, the computer room, science labs, automobile workshops, the woodwork shop, the machine shed and farm buildings including a cow shed.

What is the background of your students? And of the teachers who have worked at Sholai?

Our students and teachers have come from a range of backgrounds, from Ladakh to Kanyakumari and from Mumbai to Kolkata. We have also had some teachers and young people from outside India. Initially the children seemed to be quite conditioned by the culture of male-chauvinism, subtle or gross, but nowadays both boys and girls play badminton, silambatam and football. In all activities girls are as active as the boys.

Our non-teaching staff, many of them having learnt English, are interested in our students, and their inputs about the sensitivity and behaviour of the students are listened to. Very few schools maintain the community in this way. But being a remote community, the local people who have worked with us for twenty or more years appreciate that our school is different and certainly worth supporting.

Can you say something about the different aspects of education that have evolved at Sholai?

For the purpose of communicating with the school parents, we first talk about the emotional and social education of children.

Emotional and social education: We have children ranging from the very wealthy to children having disturbed family circumstances and those coming from poor families. Some children may be deeply hurt by their life experiences, other children can rise above 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. This is where the teacher begins his or her work, assisting the child to be watchful and aware of his grievances, his complaints, her delights, his anger, etc. Expressing oneself in drama is a valuable and good experience, but more than that, to know oneself, 'warts and all', is to help the child to be aware that she can empathize with another child (or adult) and learn together how to be thoughtful and kind to others. That is the broad field of emotional education, in which both teachers and students are learning together. This is in tune with Krishnamurti's focus on emotional education, which is part and parcel of self-knowledge.

However young people are not perfect; and, aware that the same can be said of the adults, they question and sometimes defy the good intentions of the teachers. These are some of the challenges that inevitably arise in this small community. So, we often meet and talk over the problems.

Apart from this, we encourage the students to learn how to behave when in public: not shouting loudly in the school bus on a school trip, observing the changing countryside and not escaping into a world of second-rate pop music

on earphones. We avoid being dictatorial, encouraging the students to think for themselves.

Relevant intellectual education: We draw on both Gandhi and Tagore, who saw education as an exploration in learning between human beings of different age levels and socio-economic backgrounds. They did not see technologies playing a big part in the development of those relationships. Krishnamurti pointed out, later, that with computers expanding their roles in society, what would human beings do with their brains? He emphasised careful observation of the world around us, along with self-knowledge. He was also highly sceptical of the cultural emphasis on competition and comparison or becoming more knowledgeable than the next man. He pointed out that knowledge is limited and does not lead to wisdom. So, learning in relationship with one another and with nature is crucial to our self-awareness.

Intellectual education, of course, includes a vast field of knowledge, and various areas of study can be connected. The school library is very well-stocked with a wide range of books, and students enjoy reading books that interest them. We also encourage them to care for the land and our connections with it. From time to time, we arrange educational school trips. Children who live in the hills should have an opportunity to swim in the sea and children living beside the seashore should experience climbing up

the ghat roads and footpaths, seeing the vast patchwork of fields in the plains below. Students draw maps of the sub-continent and also of their own local area. While mapping the local area, they can link up with measurements. They learn 'length, width and thickness' in the imperial and metric systems, using tape measures, rulers, etc. They measure one another and weigh one another and themselves.

The conventional intellectual field is generally criss-crossed by comparison and competition. 'I know more than you' or 'I have studied up to a higher level than you' and so on. Human relationships, moreover, are generally based on these comparisons and fears. We need to be aware of our fears and insecurities; our tendencies to be competitive and aggressive. We talk over these issues with the teachers and students. We need to help teachers in dealing with these tendencies and to listen to the difficulties they face in doing this. Nowadays, the usual complaint is that the students no longer respect their teachers. We cannot turn the clock back. But can we not establish a different relationship in which the teachers are listening to the students, their problems and their insecurities, and helping them to understand that this is the common lot of humankind? In this regard, a film comes to mind: *To Sir, With Love*. It is centred around teenagers of mixed parentage (black, white and brown) in London, who are a rough lot. They were trying to make their teacher angry and succeeding, until

he realized that the intellectual education, which they urgently required, needs to be more relevant and interesting in their own lives.

Physical and health education: Children need to experience a range of activities so as to be healthy, having a robust immune system, aware of what are the healthy foods they need to consume; neither being overweight, nor being under-weight. They need to know how to care for themselves, when unwell. So, they need to have some basic knowledge of Homeopathic and Ayurvedic medicines. To know nothing may be more foolish than having half-baked knowledge, hence we need to be open, avoiding fixed conclusions and learning about what works for our bodies.

All the students learn to run...100 metres, 200 metres and 400 metres. Of course, being clear that there are differences among human beings, and there is no need to compare. While competitive sports are part of the wider culture, less aggressive and gentler activities are encouraged in the school including badminton, cross-country running and trekking. 'Philosophical football' is popular, wherein girls are also enthusiastic.

Practical education and learning skills: This brings us to the fact that there is a broad diversity among young people in terms of what they enjoy learning. Some may enjoy reading, acquiring more knowledge, discussing and exploring intellectually. Others may prefer learning

skills, such as organic farming, woodwork, building, mechanical engineering, pottery, cooking, art, etc. The teachers need to understand that teaching practical skills is not *infra dig*. Becoming competent in a practical skill assists the child to become more confident and attentive to the environment and to people around her. From thereon he or she can learn the intellectual components of the practical skills, without the need for pressure from the teacher.

In general gender should not play a role in the child's involvement in a skill. Exposure to many experiences broadens the mind. So, boys too need to learn to cook, and girls learn woodwork or mechanical engineering. There are also skills involved in taking care of the campus. During the time of doing morning jobs, students segregate and recycle the waste of the community and assist in keeping the school neat and orderly. A specific skill that students at Sholai have also learnt is to rebuild vintage automobiles (because they are easier to work on) and are now repairing a large biogas drum.

What are some things you like to share with parents who send their children to your school?

Most schools are based on fear: 'If we don't use fear, how will we make sure that the students study hard and pass their exams?' But in schools where there is no fear (or very much less fear), we see that the children really enjoy learning. I tell parents not to worry too much about their children's future or what careers they

will be fit for; because then the young person will choose an occupation to placate the parents or, occasionally, to defy their parents. Children who have good memories can 'mug up' for exams but will rarely have understood, nor enjoyed, the subjects they learn. So, I tell them, 'do allow your child to choose what he or she wants to do in life.' Giving him or her plenty of experiences in school will allow them to be clear about what they enjoy doing. At times they may change their course in life, and there is nothing wrong with that. Most young people nowadays look for a worthwhile occupation that will benefit the planet or benefit people living in poor or polluted communities. Is that not a good thing? At Sholai, we also support young people, especially those from poor families, in finding what is worthwhile for them to do in their lives.

Can you give some examples of what students from the school have done in their lives?

A student, X, from a poor family, involved himself deeply in a project undertaken by Sholai CLOAAT with the Ministry of Science and Technology, New Delhi. We contracted with a company in Hyderabad to use Geographical Information Systems. X, aged seventeen, quickly understood this new GIS Technology and created the main component of the project. It took us six years to finally complete the project, but it is recognized today as a serious exploration of Meaningful and Creative Rural Development supported by Appropriate Science and Technologies.

X is now Vice-Principal of a school in Goa. When young people are given the freedom to learn and explore, they can do serious and valuable work.

Another former Sholai student, Y, was never very serious about studies after a teacher in his previous school hit him in the face. He enjoyed cracking jokes and playing football; but then failed his Cambridge A level exams. He was good with computers, so he went to Bengaluru to train himself, but did not enjoy the unhealthy life there. Being from a poor family, he wanted to earn to support his parents. Knowing his cheerful nature, we asked him to try out teaching at Sholai. We find he is learning fast to be a good teacher. In his free time, he is also learning to be an Equity Analyst. This may be a risky profession, especially if there is a financial meltdown in future, but then this would be true of many other callings too.

What is it that you wish for your students in their life ahead?

In a video with Rishi Valley students, Krishnamurti asked the students, ‘what

are the basic needs in life?’. He was told: ‘food, clothing and shelter’. Then a young lady of twelve said: ‘Can we not include “fun”?’ He agreed: ‘Fun, food, clothing, and shelter it is.’ But the basic element of ‘conditioning’ often forces young people to do what society demands of them. That does not lead to ‘fun’ (in the sense of a meaningful life!). And yet ‘fun’ too can become a habit and an escape. So, the challenge nowadays is for sincere teachers to assist students in deepening their perception of life and to understand the many self-centred ways in which we are creating religious, political and psychological divisions among human beings, destroying nature and damaging the planet.

At Sholai, we have now been at it for thirty-five years. I think I can say that almost all the alumni love their old school and are mostly happy human beings.

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Our websites

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www.kfionline.org
www.jkrishnamurti.org

Copy-edited by Seema Narayanankutty
Original design by Deepa Kamath, Mumbai
Designed and typeset by Malvika Mehra, Chennai
Printed at Sudarshan Graphics, 4/641, 12th Link Street, 3rd Cross Road, Nehru Nagar
Kottivakam, Chennai 600 041

Cover printed on recycled paper

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