

# **FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE VALLEY SCHOOL, KFI**

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## **FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE VALLEY SCHOOL, KFI**

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As a recipient of the Shiv Lal Sawhney Fellowship' 24 in Delhi School of Economics, I had the opportunity to conduct research focusing on the Sociology of Education at The Valley School in Bangalore. My research topic is to explore relationships through student friendships, the role of the school in fostering relationships, students' relationship with nature, and the sustaining of kin-like bonds forged among alumni of The Valley School.

“The Valley is a community formed through generations of students. Those who once studied in the Valley often send their kids there, continuing a tradition that forges kin-like bonds and a sense of family between the former and the current students.” responded by one of the alumni. Rajeesh, an alumnus who graduated in the 1990s shared that he and his friends have never faltered to attend a single school birthday celebration and hence travelling back every year for nearly 30 years.

The school's birthday, celebrated on 17th of July every year, is an event to witness the gathering of more than 1500 alumni. Students from diverse batches and age groups never fail to return to campus for this occasion. In 2024, many alumni arrived a night early and stayed in the guest houses with friends, engaging in activities they used to enjoy during their school days such as having dinner together and taking long walks, etc. One alumna from the batch of 1995, who also taught at the Valley for some years and now has a daughter studying there, has taken on the responsibility of vaccinating the campus dogs every year. Another alumnus from the batch of 1993 came with his two sons, both of whom recently graduated from the Valley. All three are football players and often visit school to play. Every year on the school's birthday, a friendly football match is held between current Valley students and alumni. In previous years, the father and son would play on opposite teams, but this time, both played for the alumni team. Many former students also meet in the evenings outside of the school to play football together. One alumnus, ever since graduating in the 1990s, has never missed even a single school birthday, travelling back every year without fail. Even those living abroad plan their vacations to ensure they can attend. The day serves as a powerful reunion bringing together friends who've virtually remained connected over the years.

The bonds among alumni also include former students of the Valley school, who even in their later years, continue to go on trips together.

During my summer research at The Valley School, I explored the question of friendship, close relationships and kin-like bonds. Friendship is central to one's everyday living and school serves as a primary setting for cultivating friendships and peer relations. It involves 'doing things together' which strengthens one's friendship by shared activities, attitudes, experience and interests. Friendship develops an expression in talking, doing things and being together (Thapan, 2006, p. 152).

In anthropology, friendship was long considered historically secondary to dominant kinship ideologies. However, sentiments and permanence are features which caters to both friendship and kinship (Obeid in *Ways of Friendship*, 2010, p. 95). As a result, some scholars argue that although friendship and kinship are distinct relationships, friendship is part of the ideology of sociality, at the heart of which lies kinship (Obeid, 2010, p. 102). Friendship is often considered to be free from obligations associated with the dominant hierarchical principles of kinship. However, contemporary anthropologists have increasingly questioned the rigidity of these kinship principles within the broader field of sociality. Friends are sometimes labelled as kin, exhibiting characteristics similar to those found in typical kin bonds (Ballweg in *wood*, 1978, p. 372). The norms governing kinship have undergone transformation, making them increasingly similar to those of friendships. Kinship today can be seen as just as achieved as friendship (Paine in *wood*, 1978, p. 372). Conventional morality portrays kin ties as enduring, long lasting, reliable and trustworthy (Obeid in *Ways of Friendship*, 2010, p. 108). However, friendship can equally prove to be as sustaining as kinship. Obeid (2010) provides an ethnographic example of a friend stepping in to fulfill obligations typically expected of brothers when the brothers failed to do so. Likewise, one girl described her close friend as "like my sister," illustrating that good friends can be as precious as blood relatives, even without biological ties. This demonstrates how such relationships can attain a kin-like status of equal value and persistence, and, in many instances even outlast the endurance of conventional- kinship ties (Obeid in *Ways of Friendship*, 2010, p. 108-109). Voluntarism, egalitarianism and choice often distinguishes friendship as non-kin, but the

boundaries between the two can and do overlap. This points to an understanding of kinship that extends beyond heredity to including the ideology of choosing one's kin.

Inspired by the work of Janet Carsten and Kath Weston on the evolving concept of kinship beyond the traditional anthropologists' view on kinship, I explored the forging of dynamic relationships within the school setting of The Valley. Janet Carsten, in the *Culture of Relatedness: New Approach to the study of Kinship*, has challenged the understanding of kinship as strictly descent-based, introducing the concept of "relatedness" to encompass a wider range of fluid and flexible ties formed through everyday social practices (Carsten, 2000, p. 15-16). It is emphasized how sharing of substances or spaces can equally establish sustaining kin-like bonds as effectively as genealogical relations. This new approach to kinship focuses on 'being related' through material, social, and affective ties, transcending rigid biological definitions (Carsten, 2000, p. 1).

Kath Weston in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, has further shifted the focus from the trajectory of family as strictly biological or based on marriage to family as something voluntarily chosen. It dismisses the binary that assumes non-existence of family determined by the distinction between straight or gay identity. Instead, it reflects the idea that family or kinship is determined by the inclusive understanding of relationships based on affection and emotion rather than blood ties. It emphasizes the recognition and legitimacy of chosen families and diverse forms of kinship based on friendship, partnership, parenting, etc. relationships formed on their own terms (Weston, 1991).

Janaki Abraham (2023, p. 106) in the chapter 'Caste and Kinship' from *The Oxford Handbook of Caste*, reinforces the idea that kinship is not limited to genealogical or legal bonds but has expanded to embrace intimate, non-normative, and kinship-like relationships, what were once called 'fictive kinship'. This encompasses non-heterosexual relationships, friendships, and other socially constructed bonds that are formed rather than inherited or legally established.

In *The Ways of Friendship*, Rodger, Obeid and Froerer examined the dialectical interaction between friendship and kinship, exploring how friendship is either distinct or embedded in the foundational social framework of kinship. Through ethnographic studies, the authors analyze how

the typical characteristics of friendship and kinship are either rooted as one or justified as distinct. The book also showcases the overlapping nature of kinship and friendship through demonstrating similar qualities, such as loyalty, support, equivalent values and prospects, demonstrating how kin-like bonds can emerge in different contexts worldwide (Desai, Killick; 2010, p. 1-197).

Wood and Robertson (1978) put forth how peer relationships among the elderly people can provide greater life satisfaction and morale in comparison to conventional kinship ties. The shared experiences and common interests among peers often lead to happiness and emotionally fulfilling relationships than those governed by dominant kinship obligations. Ackerman, Kenrick and Schaller (2007), highlighted the functional similarity of friendship and kinship. Their research shows how friendships sometimes adopt psychological mechanisms associated with kinship, stressing the gendered dimensions of support and loyalty. (Ackerman et al., 2007).

## **Introduction**

Taking pride in fostering a close relationship with nature, the Valley School was established as an alternative school in 1978 under the Krishnamurti Foundation of India (KFI), inspired by J. Krishnamurti's vision of revolutionising learning methods. With a community of 420 students and 80 faculty members, the school is situated on 100 acres of lush greenery on the outskirts of Bangalore (Choudhury, 2018, p. 186). The school campus is divided into three main areas: the academic zone with classrooms, administrative offices and a dining hall; residential zone that includes hostels, guest houses and teacher accommodations; and amidst the forest is the art village and the study centre. Education is organised into junior school (grades 1-4), middle school (grades 5-7), and senior schools (grades 8-12). As Meenakshi Thapan (2006) notes, the school reflects a dichotomy between the transcendental order of Krishnamurti values and the local order of the governed schooling process. Reflecting this, there are no formal examinations until grade 9, at which point assessment begins in preparation for the ICSE and ISC boards. This system promotes a healthy learning environment free from early academic pressure.

Hostels accommodations are provided for students in grades 11 and 12, with students mixed by age and grade for encouraging vertical interactions. Most students are weekly boarders who return back home on weekends, while full boarders go home once a month. Daily routines include

assemblies, a “ragi break” (snack break), and communal meals, with students responsible for washing their own utensils and maintaining cleanliness. Hostellers in grades 11 and 12 follow a structured schedule that includes early morning activities, silent reflection time, and evening study sessions. The Art Village offers students exposure to a wide range of artistic and craft-based activities. Community-building activities such as poetry sessions, moonlight walks, and forums create space for discussions, self-expression and dialogue.

In order to understand the formation of relationships within the school setting, it is important to consider the role of the school and its philosophy in fostering quality and healthy relationships. Schools under the Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) depict a hallmark of education that goes beyond the conventional academic curriculum, incorporating multiple dimensions of learning. Their educational philosophy emphasizes learning without pressure, creating a space for students to self-reflect, express themselves, and explore without the burden of unhealthy competition, fostering a holistic and inclusive environment.

Balaji Subramanian in his thesis, *Survival of Alternative Logics in Mature Fields: the Case of Alternative Schools in India* (2019) highlighted how some organizations challenge dominant institutionalized norms by establishing an alternative set of rules through a distinct educational philosophy, that prioritizes the needs of the students (Subramanian, 2019). Breaking away from the dominant culture rooted in fear, pressure, punishment, hierarchy and competition, the Valley school tends to encourage freedom, exploration, self-motivation and self-expression as the alternate culture of learning. In an attempt to develop close bonds without hierarchy or domination, students at the Valley do not use authoritative terms such as “ma’am” or “sir” to address the teachers. Instead, they use kinship terms such as “aunty”, “didi”, “bhaiya,” or even refer to teachers by their names.

Rajvi Trivedi and Pramod Kumar MPM in *Nurturing a Better Future for Best Schooling Practices: A Review Portraying the Alternative Schooling, Bangalore, Karnataka, India*, explore how schools, as key social institutions, shape individuals from early childhood by influencing their thinking, behavior and future success (Kumar, 2020). Relationships in Valley School are rooted in conversations and communications. It is a reflective space where students are encouraged to look

at their inner selves, and where their actions are seen as a reflection of their relation with themselves and with others. The school's activities, curriculum and daily routine play a significant role in cultivating interaction in a natural and organic way. Students are given space to express themselves without any fear of authority. They are taught to confront and understand human emotions such as care, empathy and fear, rather than suppressing them. There is a constant emphasis on the freedom of mind to think and act independently. While students are expected to follow the guidelines of the school, they are also encouraged to question them. Meenakshi Thapan in *Life at School: An Ethnographic Study*, wrote about Rishi Valley School, one of the oldest schools of Krishnamurti foundation, emphasising the quality of the mind in terms of mental and emotional capacities of the students in bringing well-being of all forms of life, awakening a sense of humanity over material wealth (Thapan, 2006, p. 8).

While exploring practices within The Valley that enhance quality and sustaining kin-like relationships, it is essential to foreground Jiddu Krishnamurti's philosophy on education and relationships.

### **Jiddu Krishnamurti's Philosophy**

Maniram, the Director of the Valley School KFI, expressed that while Krishnamurti established the school with a clear intent, it is necessary to translate that intent into a lived approach within the school. With an aim to forge meaningful relationships, the number of students is intentionally kept limited. A smaller student and faculty population allows for the development of close relations and facilitates holistic development (Thapan, 2006, p. 135). According to Krishnamurti, "What is important is how we approach any problem. If we don't understand ourselves in a relationship, whatever society we create, whatever ideas, opinions we may have, will only bring about further mischief and misery (Krishnamurti, 2014, p. 48). The Valley School provides students with the space to discover their own interests and work on themselves. It grants them the freedom of mind to choose activities they are passionate about, to build a genuine relationship with themselves that naturally reflects in their relationship with others. Most students gravitate toward activities that enable them to express their feelings, creativity and hidden talents (Thapan, 2006, p. 142). It allows the students to introspect their own actions and behavior which in turn influences their interactions with others. Krishnamurti envisioned a quality of education that helps individuals realise their

potential by encouraging themselves to inquire into their inner selves and be understanding of their own feelings and emotions (Thapan, 2022, p. 2).

Nilesh, the Director of the Teacher's Education Program quoted Krishnamurti, "The ignorant man is not the unlearned but he who does not know himself and the learned man is stupid when he relies on books on knowledge and on authority to give him understanding. Understanding comes only through self-knowledge, which is awareness of one's total psychological process (Krishnamurti, 1997, p.17). He emphasized that one needs to understand oneself inwardly. To illustrate this, he gave an example: if someone buys a car and considers himself to be superior to others, then their entire sense of self becomes dependent on the car. This reflects a void or inner emptiness where he needs to derive self-worth from an external object. Such a person is inwardly impoverished, and therefore, it's necessary to recognize one's value from within.

Krishnamurti focused on education that makes individuals value their own life and nurture the awareness and commitment to personal goals along with a deep care for the world of nature. His teachings are not intended to be dogma or doctrine imposed as rigid rules. There is complete freedom to question everything. The school doesn't idolize Krishnamurti's values in an unquestioning manner. Krishnamurti himself emphasized on human intelligence which has freedom from conditioning, memory, tradition and repetitive knowledge (Thapan, 2022, pp. 2-6).

While exploring Krishnamurti's philosophy during my fieldwork, I came to understand that his teachings are deeply connected to one's own life, therefore, rather than preaching or teaching, they are discussed and debated allowing individuals to see and discover themselves. Krishnamurti encouraged us to reflect on the "what ifs" of our lives. His philosophy isn't instilled overtly; instead, it is meant to emerge naturally and organically, through personal understanding. Nilesh said that the students need not be constantly reminded of the values once they begin to understand themselves. Krishnamurti's understandings are presented in a way that encourages students to be aware of their actions. The goal is to initiate the process of thinking. Each individual is expected to explore deeply at their own level and cultivate intelligence rather than imitating predetermined patterns. The values of life are implicitly woven into various activities throughout the school routine such as washing one's own dishes, cleaning classrooms and the dining hall, engaging in



land care, learning empathy in culture classes, avoiding competition and comparison during sports, etc. The emphasis is on fostering the sense of freedom, where students become aware of their own urges and motivations through their own daily actions and thoughts, which Krishnamurti sees as the root of intelligence (Krishnamurti, 2014, p. 3). The feeling of security in relationships only arises when there is no fear of authority or punishment (Krishnamurti, 2014, p. 7). The function of education itself is to free a student from the fear of being controlled or judged which limits all forms of expression of intelligence and creativity. Unless individuals are free to express themselves and observe their own actions in the process, they will face limitations in forming meaningful relationships with themselves and with others as that would instill a constant fear of being wronged or judged. For Krishnamurti, education should be a means of forming true relationships with things, with human beings and with nature (Krishnamurti, 2014, p. 30).

One instance I observed that reflects Krishnamurti's philosophy of education is how students determine their actions and relationships during the annual league match held at the school. While attending a strategic meeting for the league match, the captain of one of the six teams shared a perspective aligning with Krishnamurti's ideas. He explained that the games which include football, basketball and volleyball, should be approached as an opportunity for personal growth by upgrading their own skill, giving their best and achieving something meaningful for themselves. The captain encouraged the team to avoid unhealthy competition and comparison, both within the team and with opposing teams, and instead to learn from those who play better. Krishnamurti once said, "When I have understood that comparison in any form leads only to greater illusion and greater misery" (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 23). The captain asked them not to make hurtful jokes or demean others, noting what may seem like a joke can perpetuate at a much deeper level and end up creating conflict. He emphasized that true reward lies in the process of self-development through the match, rather than external or tangible rewards. He also discouraged unhealthy practices like betting against other teams, as these create unnecessary pressure on the players. The league match is a space for entertainment, learning and teamwork, and not for fostering animosity. The 2023 league match, in particular, helped the captain foster deeper friendship with his team mates, relationships which stayed beyond just the field. It's about being present for each other and offering support to each other. He emphasised on love, passion and genuine interest for the game to be their motivation (Thapan, 2006, p. 152).

As per my observation, during the match, even in the absence of intense competition, there was still a tendency among some teammates to focus primarily on winning the game. The spirit of sportsmanship often draws students into thinking in terms of winning and losing, regardless of how friendly the match may be (Thapan, 2006, p. 151). During a basketball match between the purple and the blue teams, whose captains happen to be closest friends, the players took on the roles of opponents during the game, yet there was no sign of conflict or arguments. Although the purple team won, there wasn't any sign of animosity between the teams and they immediately hugged, cheered for each other and quickly returned to their usual cordial relationships. The outcome of the game seemed secondary, there was no reward, and conversations about it faded shortly afterward. The school contributed to minimizing unhealthy competition by rescheduling the match time from the evening to the morning. This shift allowed the students to spend the rest of the day together, creating opportunities to interact and mix, rather than immediately going back home, potentially holding onto grudges. Based on the observation of these matches, sports in Krishnamurti schools carry low stakes. There is no association with prestige, fame, or tangible rewards. The games are played with enthusiasm and energy but are soon forgotten, leaving no lingering memory of its outcome that might otherwise sustain bitterness or division among students.

Girish, a volunteer at Study Center and organizer of dialogue sessions on Krishnamurti's philosophy, expressed that Krishnamurti's teachings are primarily meant for teachers and parents to help them understand the significance of life and inner well-being. It is them who can translate a fearless innovative learning atmosphere to the children. Everyone, he noted, is at a different stage in their learning journey. Teachers are exposed to Krishnamurti's ideas and the truth of living life through various study meets and sessions at the Study Center. Krishnamurti once said, "Since education is the responsibility of the parents as well as the teachers, we must learn the art of working together, and it is possible only when each of us perceives what is true" (Krishnamurti, 2014, p. 16). Nilesh believes that some engagement with Krishnamurti's philosophy should be encouraged among teachers, not as a doctrine but as a discussion, to advocate a healthy and friendly atmosphere in the classroom. He gave the example that if a teacher advocates only competition and comparison to be the ideal form of learning, it might produce good academic results but would

ultimately undermine the goal of learning without imitation. Girish emphasized the importance of nurturing curiosity and enabling learning beyond the conventional framework including non-bookish learning such as in culture classes, where students engage in informal conversations with teachers and peers to explore ideas about care and empathy. In these classes, students are regularly asked questions and are prompted to investigate to answer and reflect on their responses. No answer is discarded; instead, every response is discussed. Maniram mentioned that the school is designed to ensure both mental and physical security for children. This security might encourage them to further foster meaningful relationships through open communication and confident expression, free from fear. Students are given the freedom to speak their minds, engage in conversation, and build bonds with one another within an environment that promotes healthy boundaries.

## **Methodology**

I stayed at the Valley school for one month during June and July, applying qualitative ethnographic research methods. My methodology includes participant observation, unstructured interviews, and informal conversations with teachers, students, alumni, dignitaries, and administrative staff. I actively participated in a wide range of activities across all grades, including informal classes such as circle time and culture classes, as well as games, assemblies, activities in the Art Village, land care, long walks, library sessions, time in the staff room, the dining hall and the Study Center. To understand how student bonding developed in the dining hall, I engaged in conversations with both teachers and students while eating and washing utensils during breakfast, lunch, dinner and evening snacks in the dining hall. I also accompanied teachers and students on walks within and outside the campus, including during heritage walks. During ragi breaks and the final snack time of the day, I would sit with the students and sometimes join them in play during free periods.

I started my first day with participation in the culture class of class 8 and later attended the culture classes of mainly the middle and junior school, taken by the school counselor, as well as the combined vertical group culture classes of the senior school. I was an active observer of circle time, a class with the class teacher, held mainly in middle and junior school. I also joined the junior, middle and senior school in their games period by playing with them or entering into

conversations with those not playing, as well as with the sports teachers. I observed the classes conducted by the library educator in the library while also assisting in the library work. I also had various informal conversations with teachers and the accountant, who were staying in the same guest house as me. I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with the Principal, the Secretary of the school, the Directors of the Teacher's Education Program, the Volunteer at the Study Center, middle and senior school class teachers, and around seven to eight alumni, who were either teachers or visiting the campus. Additionally, I held focus group discussions with approximately twenty alumni, particularly during daily visits to the campus, the alumni meet, and the school's birthday celebration.

I took part in land care classes and long walks with students in the junior and middle school, as well as with class 8. I also attended the teachers' study meets, Thursday and Sunday dialogue sessions, and other special sessions at the Study Center. In the art village, I observed classes in dance, singing and theater, and participated in pottery, weaving, carpentry and art classes along with students across different grade levels. I also had conversations with hostel students during evening sports, morning activities, and dinner. I joined them during their silent time, forum meetings, long moonlight walks and the Sangam gathering. My observations, active participation and informal conversations with most teachers, administrative staff, and students across various grades served as the main source of data collection in the field. One limitation of my research was the language barrier I faced with some support staff. I was unable to communicate effectively with workers addressed by kinship terms "amma" and "anna", as I am not fluent in Kannada.

In the next section, I have divided this research into five subsections to explore the central research questions: how relationships are built at the Valley school through an unconventional framework of learning, and how the cultivation of quality, sustaining and healthy relationships ultimately leads to the formation of kin-like bonds among alumni.

### **Relations forged inside the Classroom**

Relationships at the Valley school are built through an unconventional approach to learning, fostered by a thoughtfully designed curriculum. The curriculum plays a very welcoming role in

nurturing bonds and connections among students. One example is the presence of mixed-age vertical groups comprising grade 2,3, and 4, an attempt by the school to promote inter-age interaction and social learning. Kieran Egan in *Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School*, talked about the importance of nurturing a child's intellectual imagination through alternative pedagogies, identifying child's imagination as the most powerful and energetic learning tool (Egan, 1989, p. 2). The pedagogy in the Valley school also reflects an effort by teachers in molding the child's creativity and intellect through a curriculum that responds to their specific developmental needs. Within the classroom, there is 'circle time' where the students sit in a circle along with the class teachers to engage in an open conversation in forms of various activities, as well as the 'culture class' which is an empirical discussion about values of life and relationships. With no more than thirty students, the setting allows for more intimate and meaningful connections to form.

"For Krishnamurti, it was important that educators do not merely teach academic subjects at school but cultivate in children their total responsibility to the rest of humankind, the earth, and nature" (Thapan, 2022, p. 15-16). Culture classes for middle and junior school are often led by the school counselor and are designed to address daily challenges and interpersonal conflicts. Through creative methods such as role plays, students learn ways to navigate real-life situations. The classes encourage reflection on values such as empathy, care, fear and emotional understanding through multiple creative learning methods. Rather than imposing lessons on students directly, teachers guide students to arrive at their own innovative approaches to conflict resolution. For instance, students are asked questions, encouraged to share their thoughts and initiate conversations rather than passively accepting the teacher's perspective. They are often divided into mixed teams to strategize and accomplish the team work, enabling them to form deeper bonds extending beyond the classroom interaction. Students of standard six were given to address a situation involving how to treat a new student with empathy. They were asked to play roles of being both the new and the old student, reflecting on the need for mutual understanding and kindness. The idea of "fitting in" was questioned using examples, such as the discomfort a student felt wearing black leggings everyday just to fit into a group's unspoken dress code. The discussion explored angles of how students might sacrifice their individuality in order to feel accepted, leading to loss of voice and identity. To foster friendship, students were given assignments like identifying three

commonalities and differences with their tablemates, enabling discovery of common interests. Two of them discovered that they were both scared of heights and enjoyed ragi breaks. The underlying lesson was to embrace differences and avoid changing oneself to fit in, while creating space for others to be accepted as they are.

Another culture class for standard five emphasized team building, where students were divided into two large circles and asked to hold hands while moving back and forth without letting go. Initially, many students were reluctant to hold hands with those they weren't friends with, but over time, in order to complete the task and strategize, they began to communicate with each other and eventually became comfortable holding hands. After the task, students were asked what they had learned, and they responded that teamwork and coordination makes any task easier. In another activity, students were also asked to wear each other's shoes but found it quite uncomfortable. This exercise taught them that everyone is different and it is necessary to nurture these differences and work to change any negative perceptions they might hold towards others. These culture classes aim to instill a culture of healthy relationship-building among students where students are trained to handle conflict independently and reflectively. For instance, senior school students have had sessions on desire and expectations, encouraging students to introspect and think deeply upon relationship dynamics and socio-emotional impact of unmet expectations. It explores how personal desires and social expectations can affect relationships, and create internal or external pressure. In a mixed-age group class in the junior school, activities focused on understanding bodily boundaries, such as differentiating between good touch and bad touch, and how to relate those boundaries in interactions with others. These classes often pose open-ended questions that lead to endless conversation about life, relationship, and inner-wellbeing.

The Class Teacher (CT) classes in middle school, also referred to as 'circle time', are scheduled on most days of the week and function as a safe communicative space to address various concerns and also to foster a sense of belongingness among students. CT classes don't always take place inside the classroom but they may also be held outdoors, in the yoga room, at the mahasagar (the senior school assembly area), or any space that feels appropriate. The class teachers join the students in a circle and address concerns raised both implicitly and explicitly. The teachers use a number of sensitive and innovative approaches to address the concerns which spark conversation

between students and teachers. For example, class teachers in standard five attempted to address issues such as subtle bullying, disrespect towards peers or teachers, and challenges in forming friendships, etc. Students were asked to write down their concerns, either anonymously or with their name and submit them to the class teacher. All the issues were addressed in the next CT class in a way that allowed all voices to be heard. It isn't a one-way lecture but a collaborative discussion between students and teachers, giving equal chances to everyone. Concerns included speaking ill of others, interrupting while someone is talking, bullying on the bus, touching others belongings without permission, dominating conversations, and laughing at others, etc. In response, students were asked to reflect and suggest what can be done differently from their end to prevent these issues from recurring. The suggestions included: not talking behind people's back, being kind and respectful, welcoming everyone to join in games, not invading others privacy and reminding themselves of these values to make the class a safe and comfortable space. Rather than imposing strict discipline or action, teachers guide students toward self-reflection and independent thinking. This freedom of mind allows the students to take responsibility for their actions and build respectful, compassionate companionships.

In a CT class for class six, the teachers addressed the inter-class matches held among fifth, sixth and seventh graders of middle school, which provoked intense competition and conflict among the classes. When asked about the repercussions of their behaviour, students acknowledged that their actions led to an intense game, turning into a fight. This shows how students are aware of their role in the pedagogic process and don't view themselves as passive learners. Instead, they actively participate in the class and engage in their own growth (Thapan, 2006, p. 140). The idea of winning and losing across classes is discouraged to avoid feelings of superiority and long-term resentment. In one of the CT classes of standard five, the students were asked to draw an incident in which they were rude or unkind to others and share it with a partner. Then they were prompted to reflect upon how they would feel if somebody would be similarly unkind to them. Soon the students started reflecting on it and shared many incidents when they felt extremely sad or angry. They expressed their feelings of sadness, anger, and regret in the safe space created by the teachers. The vision of the KFI schools is to instill a sense of companionship between students and teachers through self-inquiry and conscious perception as part of the educational experience (Thapan, 2022, p. 5).

The pedagogy at the Valley School is not about blindly following directions given by teachers but more about encouraging students to use their own intellect to arrive at answers, reflect on their own behavior, and evolve through self-understanding and thoughtful actions.

### **Relations Forged Outside Classrooms**

Friendship is determined by the shared activities individuals engage in, the way they meet, and the frequency of their interactions. (Froerer in *Ways of Friendship*, 2010, p. 135). Doing things together during childhood in the same physical environment facilitates social interaction and close friendships (ibid). Outside the classrooms, there are games classes, library activities, land care & long walks, and art village activities such as carpentry, pottery, art, theater, dance and music. Relationships built in the hostel accommodation through shared activities are also significant to consider. The Himalayan trek undertaken by students of class 11 is seen as one of the turning points in forging strong friendships among the students.

Over the past three years, the library at The Valley School has evolved into a community learning space moving away from a regimented structure of 'quiet' individual learning environment. Raveena, the library educator, advocates for a style of learning that intersects philosophy, personality development and self-reflection. It is an environment where an interest in reading is nurtured through multiple activities such as playing various games, creating crafts, telling stories, acting out characters, reading aloud, and not just solitary individual reading. The library has been developed as a shared space where every student has a sense of co-ownership and collectively contributes to its maintenance. Through organizing the shelves, repairing damaged books (known as 'book hospital'), decorating the space, and discussing stories with Raveena, friendships among the students are naturally fostered. In the current academic year of 2024-2025, the theme chosen for the library is 'Mirrors and Windows'. Books are portrayed as mirrors and windows for understanding and reflecting on one's own life. One can seek social and emotional learning by finding stories, characters, places that one can relate to. These books are perceived as mirror books, which are relatable, helping them reflect on their own experiences and sense of living. Window books, on the other hand, open a view into different realities, allowing students to understand the



social and physical challenges faced by others and to develop critical thinking skills. Students are asked to pick one mirror book or window book they have read and write a reflection of it. This activity helps them explore the significance of life and relationships both within their own experiences and in worlds far different from their own.

During land care, students interact with each other while discovering things in nature. Landcare is conducted for all grades from 1 to 12, where students are taught to nurture the soil and plants by planting, removing weeds, carrying compost in pairs, digging land with a digger, and more. In the process, they are exposed to various elements of nature. They sit together, finding earthworms in the soil, spotting rare birds and trying to identify them. They observe beehives and excitedly murmur about them, dig the land to find rare stones, watch insects crawl, and often sit in groups to observe their movements. If they find an injured insect, they tend to take care of it together. Every activity connected to nature initiates a bond among them, allowing them to relate to each other. They communicate and strategize about who should dig how much so that the next step can be taken. One girl from class 1 shared with others how she had to remove a big rock while digging and got very exhausted. Even during long walks around the campus with the teachers, students take pauses to notice the sounds of birds chirping and try to identify them. They also sit together by the lake to observe the water birds.

In the Art Village, a relationship between the artist and the art is fostered. An alumnus considers the Art Village to be the highest form of artistic expression, where students follow their passion and build a relationship with their interests. Students are divided into smaller groups to undertake different activities, encouraging cooperation and coordination among them. They are supported in doing both group and solo activities, but communication and interaction are always encouraged to strategize and complete their tasks. During carpentry, students of class 8 were seen collaboratively working on projects that required the use of tools like hammers, saws and drills. If someone struggled with a tool, others would step in to teach them how to use it. Even in pottery and weaving, students work hand in hand to create their work. Lila, the head teacher of the Art Village, shared that she never stops students from talking to each other because she believes that freedom to reflect and learn at their own pace is essential. In theater class, junior school students were divided into pairs, encouraging them to communicate and develop plans together for their performances.

In games class, the sports teacher mentioned that he encourages the junior school students to play traditional games such as 'kho kho', 'lagori' (seven stones), 'kabaddi', 'chor police' and 'marble game', as these traditional games require a lot of communication among players, helping them to strengthen their bonds. As they progress, middle school students are introduced to games like frisbee, which also demands constant interaction during play. Senior school students mainly engage in basketball, volleyball and football. Although there is a spirit of competition among them, it remains low-stakes, and they are encouraged to not sustain that competition beyond the playground. Senior school students are seen helping, motivating and learning from each other collectively. The school consistently puts effort into guiding students to work as a team and to lift each other up. Even when conflicts arise among students, the school atmosphere nurtures a culture where students are encouraged to enter into conversations, resolve conflicts and maintain cordial and respectful relationships.

The house parents of both girls' and boys' hostels put in a lot of effort into framing a schedule of leisure-time and academic activities for the students, engaging in discussions with the class teachers and sports teachers as well. They often have holistic conversations with students about anything and everything, giving the hostel a homely feeling. There are no strict disciplinary actions taken; instead, when issues arise, conversations called 'sangam' take place. The act of living together serves as an important factor in increasing the degree of intimacy and engaging joint activities; this proximity plays a key role in determining enduring friendships (Froerer, 2010, pp. 144-150). Relationships among the full boarders tend to be stronger, as they even spend even their weekends in the hostel. A number of activities such as heritage walks, moonlight walks, movie time and internet time, are often organised during weekends to keep the students engaged. On most Saturday nights after dinner, the full boarders, house parents and other faculty members staying on campus take long walks to the amphitheater to sit and silently watch the fireflies under the moonlight. Relationships among the students are often deeply connected to their relationship with nature. There is also an initiative taken by the hostellers and the teachers called the 'forum session', which provides a platform for addressing concerns through discussions. One of such sessions involved discussing the rules and regulations of the school and understanding the motives behind them. The discussion revealed that rules at the Valley school are viewed more as guidelines, and

students are encouraged to question them and understand their purpose. One example a student gave is of the rule that students must not leave their dining table before the bell rings, explaining that it fosters friendships and interactions among students of different grades seated at the same table. Neelav, one of the house parents, noted that students don't fear speaking their minds. He observed that even best friends would call each other out when necessary, indicating that their relationships are not superficial. He recalled an incident from the previous year when a new student was bullied by a few senior boys. The student decided to discuss the matter with the house parents, which initiated a broader conversation, resulting in other senior boys calling out the bullies for their awful behavior. One senior student expressed to the new student that he understood how vulnerable it feels to start a new journey, but reassured that within the hostel, there is always space to speak one's mind and discuss any difficulties. While subtle forms of bullying had existed in the past, former hostellers noted that, over time, the emphasis on conversation and addressing issues has significantly improved the situation.

The more activities that the individual shares with each other, the more they become 'interpersonally tied' through friendship, following the 'focus of activity' theory (Froerer, 2010, p. 142). Every activity in the school is intentionally designed to forge relationships among students. Activities such as cleaning the dining tables, cleaning classrooms, and cleaning glasses during ragi break known as 'ragi rota', creates groups of students who feel connected while performing these tasks, thereby strengthening relationships across grades and ages. The curriculum is designed to enrich students with local knowledge as well as to make them aware of transformations at the global level of the ecosystem (Thapan, 2022, p. 19).

### **Vertical Student Relations**

The Valley School has adopted a non-conformist horizontally flexible learning environment that cuts across grades and ages. In contrast to vertical hierarchy and age-based stratification based on age seniority (Bernstein, 1996, p. 10), the school follows a vertical mix-age group learning approach, which fosters sustaining relationships among students of different grades and age groups, a bond that even continues among some alumni. Interactions are encouraged in a way that allows students to form relationships beyond their age brackets. Juniors learn from their seniors,

and seniors develop a sense of responsibility to care for juniors. “Mutual understanding and care are common elements in friendship” as noted by Thapan (2006, p. 152). Even though contradictions might arise, this approach is an effort by the school to reduce competition and comparison among same-aged peers, instead fostering care and responsibility.

Students of standard 2,3 and 4 are divided into several vertical groups, with each group consisting of students from all three grades. According to the Principal, this system has proven efficient, as it allows students to learn beyond their age bracket and also inculcates a sense of peer learning. Students of class 2 always look forward to learning new things from class 3 and 4, and this instills a sense of responsibility to the older students. Repeated learning helps the older students better understand the concepts, enabling them to teach the younger ones more effectively. This mixed-age interaction is not limited to only classrooms but extends to outside activities such as art village classes, long walks, land care, games, and more. They play together, work on land care projects, create pottery and art work, or act in theater class together, learning from one another in every activity. One student from class 4 narrated how she teaches Bharatnatyam dance to her best friend from class 2. They first became friends during land care activities and felt fortunate to be placed in the same art class group. Since the groups are smaller, students become very comfortable and emotionally connected; however, groups are reshuffled every year to ensure interaction is not limited to just one set of peers.

When class 4 students move up to class 5, students from class 2 and 3 students often feel upset, but they still find ways to meet during recess times such as after lunch, during ragi break and during snacks breaks. On the first day of my fieldwork, I saw a student from class 5 sitting alone during lunch and went to sit near her. She expressed that ever since the starting of the new academic year, she misses her old friends, who are now in class 3 and 4 and had yet not made any new friends. She meets her old friends after having lunch. However, over the course of the month, I observed her interacting and making new friends from the middle school who shared her dining table. I also met another group where a student of class 5 was interacting with class 3 and 4 students, expressing how much they missed each other and immediately planning a time to meet the next day. These observations across mixed aged students shows a promising, healthy culture of friendship being nurtured through the school’s curriculum.

Valley school has scheduled a class called 'Vertical Group Mentorship' (VGM) every week in an effort to establish a sense of care, affection, belongingness and also responsibility among all the students. During this class, senior school students of class 12 engage with junior and middle school students while the teachers attend their staff meeting. Class 12 students are divided into pairs, each responsible for a class or group from class 1 to class 7. Older students assigned to the junior school are often seen running and playing with the younger ones or engaging in activities such as art and craft. There are two playing areas where the seniors play with the juniors, one is called 'small jungle gym' and the other is 'big jungle gym'. Students responsible for middle school students are usually seen playing football, volleyball or frisbee, or supervising while the students do their own activities. Class 12 students themselves plan a schedule of activities to be done to keep the younger ones engaged and safe at the same time. When the class 12 students take study leave before their board exams, class 11 students take over the responsibility. VGM is also a free period for students from class 8,9,10,11, providing space for students across grades and age to mingle, play games together, talk or engage in other activities. Senior girls often take on roles of mothering and protecting the younger ones with warmth and affection (Thapan, 2006, p. 159). This weekly period offers a time and space for students to interact and build bonds across the school. A former student from the batch of 2023, who was a VGM mentor for junior school students, visited the school one day and immediately went to meet a girl from class 4, with whom she had developed a close bond during VGM class. The class 4 student expressed her happiness and hugged her old VGM mentor for a long time.

It is not only through the curriculum that vertical group learning is fostered but also through the daily school routine. During lunch, sitting arrangements are made so that students from different grades are mixed at each table. During the junior and middle school lunch, students from classes 1 to 4 are intermixed, and students from classes 5 to 7 are intermixed separately. During senior school lunch, students from classes 8 to 12 sit together. The sitting arrangements are shuffled every three months to avoid groupism, but the bonds students form often continue through as they engage in other activities together. Though it might take time, students eventually interact and build friendships across grades. The task of refilling food or cleaning up the area after eating is assigned to one class at a time but requires communication among students across classes to coordinate the

task. During ragi break, an activity called ‘ragi rota’ involves a group of students from different classes taking responsibility for washing everyone’s glasses. After classes are over, students across grades are also assigned the task of cleaning classrooms and other school spaces around before leaving. In the hostel, students from classes 11 and 12 are mixed in each room, and a number of shared activities such as walks, runs, landcare, and games in the mornings and evenings further strengthens their bond.

Within the shared space of the library, activities also involve students across grades. One such activity is called ‘book relays,’ where a book is selected and passed along from one student to another. It operates on a volunteer basis, where students from different grades can sign up together, or each class can also organise it separately. They decide how many days each student can keep the book before passing it to the next student. A list of participants is posted on the notice board outside the library, facilitating cross-grade communication. Most interactions in the library happen during ragi break, short breaks, snack breaks after 3 pm, and other free periods throughout the day. Students from middle school and class 8 are most frequently seen in the library, often interacting with each other and discussing books of interest.

### **Students from Disadvantaged and Weaker Section**

“A sociology of schooling has also considered the space of schools as sites of struggle, contradiction, and change” (Thapan, 2006, p. 1). Valley school has, over the years, taken the initiative to provide education either at a concessional rate or completely free for economically disadvantaged sections, including the children of their support staff. The school culture is aimed at developing a diverse space for learning and growing, even though it’s sometimes difficult for disadvantaged children to cope with the socio-cultural differences. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) includes a provision requiring private unaided schools to provide free elementary education up to 25% reservation for children aged 6 to 14 from disadvantaged and weaker sections in the neighborhood (Mehendale & Sarangapani, 2014). The RTE program, which started at Valley school in 2014, required the school to provide free education to children from economically weaker sections from nearby areas until Class 8. However, this provision was discontinued in 2022. Despite this, the school has consistently provided free or

concession-based admissions to the children of its support staff and introduced a volunteer-based tuition system for children from nearby areas.

In the last batch, there were eight such students, two of whom continued until class 10, and one decided to pursue higher education in class 11. Sophia, the class 8 teacher, expressed that students from unprivileged backgrounds often face psychological challenges in fitting in with the rest of the student body. The parental occupation impacts the socio-economic background of a student (Thapan, 2006, p. 136). As first-generation English learners, or even the first generation school-goers, these students find it extremely difficult to adjust among peers coming with high English proficiency and highly educated backgrounds. They tend to perform poorly academically, as they often lack the privilege of receiving academic support at home. According to Mehendale & Sarangapani, (2014), in their study *Inclusion of Marginalized Children in Private Unaided School under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education*, parents send their children to such schools with the hope of providing them quality education, even if they can't assist academically at home. Though the students are provided special education support in school, it is not always effective, as they tend to lose touch with the language during holidays.

Some students try to fit in by developing skills in areas of personal interest, such as sports, which helps them to mingle with the rest of the students. Some of them, however, struggle to adjust and tend to stick to their peer group, speaking Kannada and sharing similar living experiences. I observed two students who were closer to the teacher who spoke Kannada, finding more comfort with him than being with a group of peers during a long walk. Here, education seems to act as a pedagogical action that represents the dominant class's culture, making it harder for marginalized groups to adapt (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 5-6). The forms of capital acquired by the dominant class often create barriers for the socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged, even within the school setting (Bourdieu, 1986). Sophia shared that the other students often hesitate to bond with the disadvantaged students, perceiving them as academically weaker and less able to contribute to group projects. She described how disadvantaged students attempted to upgrade their shoes to fit in better. A few years ago, such students were only made substitute players during matches or assigned the task of clicking photographs of the team, leading to instances where they shed tears out of exclusion, as Sophia recalled. Even now, she notices that



they are often assigned roles like goalkeeping in games. However, some students eventually improve their standing through excellence in sports or other activities, helping them to sustain social relationships.

Abhay, the Class 6 teacher, mentioned that there are layers of differences among the six RTE students in class 6, and hence can't be put into a single category. While most come from similar economic backgrounds, social alienation persists due to their limited experiences compared to their more privileged peers. Students from upper-class urban backgrounds tend to reproduce the values and goals of that background (Thapan, 2006, p. 138). Abhay said that because Valley is a day school, students till class 10 go back home after school hours. Many privileged students often share stories about going out for meals, movies, weekly trips and other leisure activities, as well as experiences of developing new skills through various coaching classes. During summer break, some of the students even take international trips. RTE students lack these experiences, often feel embarrassed and hesitate to bond with their peers, given the stark differences in their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). They are rarely invited to birthday parties, partly because others live in far away cities, and partly due to social exclusion, which slows the growth of friendships. The language barrier is a major factor. Many RTE students struggle with writing in English, though they eventually become more fluent in speaking. However, the early exposure and access to English-language media such as OTT platforms, enjoyed by other students, gives them a significant advantage. Being the first-generation learners, the interests of RTE students in reading English texts is limited due to their inaccessibility to the language. Students primarily bond during school organised excursions, for which participants have to pay. RTE students often find it difficult to afford these trips, but the school plays a supportive role by offering concessions and assistance.

Sophia mentioned that RTE students often hesitate to join activities like cycle rides because they don't own advanced cycles or any bicycles at all. She also recalled an incident where a class 8 girl smelled of cow dung because she was responsible for tending to her family's cow before coming to school. This highlights the stark differences in work, experiences, living standards, learning opportunities or recreation that it is psychologically challenging for disadvantaged students to adjust in the school. I also witnessed a student of class 1 becoming violent and throwing stones after being subtly bullied; a friend explained that he only speaks Kannada. The language barrier



often makes them feel completely different and this might result in violent aggression. In another case, a mother of a Class 8 student reported her son being bullied by two RTE students, a phenomena Sophia attributed to the latter's feelings of exclusion due to being repeatedly pulled out of regular classes for special education. However, Class teachers of Class 9 and 10 shared positive examples of social progress made by some students, due to their charming personality, eagerness to learn, or acceptance by their peers. One particular student became popular through his charm and skills in sports(Thapan, 2006, p. 159). Lila, the Head of Art Village, said all students at Valley are taught to respect everyone on campus. Activities such as land care and carpentry, which involve working alongside annas (support staff), helping students coordinate and work respectfully with them, reinforcing the school's inclusive ethos.

The school also plays an important role in creating a comfortable space for people coming from all backgrounds. Even after the RTE program stopped, the school continued to provide free education or concessional admissions for the children of its support staff. Even if some of them don't take formal admission, they are offered free tuition after school hours, volunteered by parents or teachers. Special classes are conducted by teachers and Class 12 students volunteer to teach mathematics and English to the RTE students. The RTE students often look forward to the extra classes by the seniors, as they develop a bond with them and are frequently seen spending time together during school hours. Special educators ensure that lessons go beyond textbooks, focusing on life skills such as building friendships and initiating friendly communication. For example, during a special class, a teacher sits with a child, reads a book relatable to the challenges of making friends, and discusses how the child could approach a classmate with a warm smile, encouraging friendly interaction.

Teachers constantly make extra efforts to create an inclusive space for students from diverse backgrounds. The CT classes and culture classes form a significant part of the curriculum, providing safe space for addressing important issues. It is also important to note that teachers, students, and support staff (such as annas and ammas) who speak Kannada make the environment more welcoming and safe for Kanna-speaking students. Raveena, the library educator, has worked hard to ensure that the library becomes a space where students can discuss a wide range of subjects, including uncomfortable but significant topics. Students are deeply encouraged to explore the

social stratification of Indian society and its effect on identity formation. In order to establish a good society, Krishnamurti emphasized on individuals to have a responsibility towards the society as being the repository of all humanity (Krishnamurti, 1993, p. 133). Education, rather than just imparting information, should help students understand problems as they arise, encouraging them to discover solutions for themselves through listening, discussion and deep reflection (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 56). In the 2022-2023 school year, students in Class 5 were divided into four groups and tasked with creating charts on caste and its atrocities. They engaged in group reading and discussions based on several picture books about caste discrimination. A carefully curated visual literature was selected to expose students to all facets of society. Special books are curated which are caste prominent to make the students exposed to the layers of the society. One student illustrated a story of a girl from a book named 'Puu', where the term *puu* is a Tamil word that depicts flowers. However, the word 'flower' is linked to waste work, reflecting the protagonist's family occupation. Another story drawn in the chart depicted a boy excluded from school because his father catches snakes. One more illustration captured the tragic story of unprivileged migrant workers and their pathetic condition during Covid-19 in India. It is named 'Jamlo walks', highlighting the struggle of a migrant boy suffering sleepless nights alone during the lockdown due to the lack of transportation. Raveena has been making a concerted effort to help students understand the realities of the world and to think about the meaningful changes they can make, starting at the school level. The broader theme of 'shared space' encompassed sub themes including casteism, racism, identity formations, community work, and more. Students not only read but also critically questioned and discussed the books before presenting their reflections through charts. Martha Nussbaum has emphasized the importance of cultivating sympathy and compassion as a responsibility of good citizenship (Nussbaum, 2015. p. 71). While the vulnerability of some students can't be overlooked, the school as an organisation has been making ongoing efforts toward meaningful and effective transformation.

### **Alumni Bonding**

One of the sustaining epitomes of relationships at Valley School is the strong bond among its alumni. Over generations, alumni of Valley School have forged kin-like relationships. Interviewing many of them and observing their presence in the school provided a visual and

emotional understanding of how these relationships were fostered through ‘doing things together’ during school years and residing in close proximity in the hostels. Relationships in adulthood are an extension of friendship cultivated by shared activities in their childhood and the permanence stems from their childhood experiences (Froerer, 2010, p. 147). The lasting nature of friendship they share mirrors characteristic features of typical kinship (Obeid, 2010), and their choice of consistent return to the school reflects a return to a chosen family and home (Weston, 1991). Alumni of the 90s also had their children studied or currently studying in Valley school showing generation connection. Valley is frequently visited by a number of alumni, sometimes on special occasions or sometimes without any occasion. On one of the weekends during my stay, a few of them visited the campus to play basketball and volleyball for recreation, had lunch together and took a long walk around the campus. They mentioned that living in the hostel played a key role in shaping their relationship with each other. They recalled that throughout the school time, activities like land care, sports, time in the library, and prep time fostered cooperation and coordination, ultimately strengthening their friendships. On weekdays, alumni are allowed to visit after class hours, and many are seen visiting after 2:30 pm.

The school, especially Maniram, plays a central role in welcoming the alumni back for various roles: as teachers, guest speakers, outreach program coordinators, volunteers, interns, or simply as parents or visitors. Currently, there are around 5-6 teachers who are themselves alumni of the school. The head of the Art Village, Lila, is an alumna from the 1993 batch. “The school was an even smaller community back then with only 100-120 students, and there were just 18 students in a class”, shared by Lila, emphasizing the close bond shared among classmates. Everyone contributed to community work beyond their scheduled work. For instance, the Principal took classes, the Hindi teacher helped in the dining hall work, creating a strong sense of connectedness. Lila had lived in the hostel since class 3. At that time, the study center served as the hostel, housing all the girls and boys in one room each with a connecting path to the house parent’s room. She recalled the intimacy of doing things together, such as studying, dancing, listening to music and cycling. She believes nature has always connected the students together as they would simply sit under trees or take long walks in the moonlight. Seniors felt responsible for juniors, often helping or guiding them in studies, without any separate prep or silent time. According to Lila aunty, the learning method at Valley School has always been unconventional. Classes were held outdoors,

under trees, and were inclusive of discussion on the significance of life. There has been an emphasis on creative freedom ever since then, encouraging students to discover their own paths, reach personal understandings and resist conforming to rigid societal conditioning. Lila noted that this spirit of questioning social norms had become an intrinsic part of her personality. She recalled spending countless hours painting, drawing and engaging in carpentry or pottery, empowered by the freedom to explore creatively. Becoming a teacher was never part of her plan, but it was Maniram who encouraged her to return and pursue art, something that always brings out the best version of herself. She also mentioned about the enduring relationship she shared with her school friends, whom she considers family. During the Covid pandemic, she and her school friends raised funds and bought medicines for a retired teacher, even covering the cost of surgery. Relationships at Valley School expand far beyond the campus, connecting the entire Valley family across time and place.

The school has always provided a space for alumni to stay connected to their roots. From time to time, it organizes alumni meets that revolve around simple, mundane school activities making them feel reconnected to the school and to each other. One such event was a singing assembly alumni meet where the alumni were invited and welcomed to conduct the morning assembly and sing as many songs as they wished from the school's songbook called 'Naadninaad'. Around 100 alumni from various batches and ages joined the assembly, singing one song after another. They spent the day taking long walks, playing volleyball and continuing to sing before gathering for lunch. Manav, an alumnus from the 2005 batch, now married to a fellow Valley alumna and current teacher at Valley, shared that it is the school environment and the people that draw him back to school. He emphasized the freedom of mind given to discover their own interests and cultivate independence. This acknowledgement of responsibility for his own life made his transition to adulthood easier, especially during college. He didn't feel lost because he had always learned to work and think for himself. He met his life partner at Valley, and appreciated how teachers never interfered in student's personal bonds. He shared that if teachers see two students attracted to each other, they never intrude on that space. On the other hand, if the teachers notice someone being lonely, they always make sure to initiate a conversation with the child. He described the school environment as one that brought serendipity into his life. Today, his daughter is in second grade at

Valley, as he and his partner wished to pass on the same learning experience. He also gets invited back to school to lead sessions on AI and social impact.

Simran, Manav's partner, a teacher and also an alumna of the 2005 batch, said that it is the culture of the school that truly sets it apart from any other school. She highlighted that the practice of silent time after assemblies or in the hostel is a valuable moment for students to introspect and reflect. Even in her classes, when she asks, "So what do you all think about xyz?", it fosters the culture of exploring one's personal understanding. According to her, the way Valley students perceive the world is unusual, the vocabulary they use is different, and this brings them together even after graduating. She recounted how her cousin, who attended a different college, once remarked that Valley students tend to stick together. Simran justified it by pointing out that they prefer to question the unhealthy competition rather than getting consumed by it. She said that the culture at Valley taught them against comparison and competition, and therefore, they attend classes not to impress professors but to pursue learning with authenticity. This sense of familiarity of values and comfort companionship keep them connected even after graduation. Their common understanding of the significance of life helps them build meaningful, authentic relationships.

The school is frequently visited by alumni who return for volunteering or interning. Nisha, an alumna from the 2017 batch, has been working on a project focused on native forest conservation and preservation, and has been staying in the school's guest house for a year now. The project centers on preserving native seeds and plants. Although Nisha initially lacked confidence in her knowledge of the field, Maniram recognised her huge interest in Environmental science and offered her to work and learn through the process. She fondly recalled her hostel days, emphasizing how the school's natural environment created shared memories and experiences among students. Back when she was staying in the hostel, the path to school was not cemented; it led through a dense forest accompanied by sounds of animals, visible footprints of wild boars and panthers as well as movements of snakes. Yet, none of this was seen as a threat and instead, life alongside other living beings was embraced, as no harm had ever come to anybody on campus. There are few alumni working in the art village as well and they believe that school has always offered them the space to stay connected to what they consider the highest form of artistic expression. Many

recent alumni have mentioned that the Himalayan trek in class 11 served as a cornerstone for building strong bonds within the class, cultivating care and responsibility for one another.

The school's emphasis on communication, conflict resolution, conversation, discussion, group activities, teamwork, and relationships laid a strong foundation for building deeper interpersonal bonds. Living together in hostels often led to sibling-like kinship bonds, and in some cases, romantic relationships evolving into kinship relations based on marriage, as three couples from the batch 2005 eventually married. 'Doing things together' such as carpentry, landcare, tending to injured animals, moonlit walks around campus, washing utensils, and cleaning up the dining hall or school areas, continue to symbolize enduring friendship. For most alumni, Valley feels like home and the relationships built there resemble close-knit kin-like bonds, no less significant than their blood relations. Maniram believes that once students graduate, they get bulldozed in the world driven by competition. Returning to the Valley allows them to pause, reflect, and reconnect with themselves. It represents a return to the family they chose, a community sustained by friendships among former students, enduring ties with teachers and non-teaching staff, and a significant relationship with nature.

## **Conclusion and Further Scope of Research**

The Valley School, as an alternative educational space, has consistently emphasized the forging of relationships through every activity and rule established within the school. Every conversation, discussion, or concern addressed encourages students to reflect on their own behavior and translate that reflection into healthier relationships with others. The relationship with nature has also played a vital role in fostering meaningful friendships among students, bonds that continue to remain relevant among alumni. Relationships forged during excursions present an interesting aspect for further study. The use of kinship terms to address everyone on campus has also fostered a sense of belongingness among all members present on the campus. There is also potential for future research on the relationship the school establishes with parents, support staff, and volunteers, as these dynamics meaningfully contribute to the school's social fabric. The strong and enduring bonds among alumni shows the irreplaceable nature of relationships that often evolve into kin-like ties. Due to paucity of time, I was unable to focus exclusively on alumni relationships, and hence,

a detailed study centred on this aspect could offer better clarity on the formation of such kin-like bonds. The strong focus on vertical relations across grades, as well as the prioritization of communication as a method of conflict resolution, has had a lasting impact in fostering sustained relationships across age groups. Further, the advocacy of limited competition and comparison among students has encouraged the development of authentic relationships, motivating everyone to pursue their own passion and interest rather than imitating others. The significance of relationships at the Valley School offers valuable contributions to the broader understanding of sociality and the study of social relationships.

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