‘RIGHT’ EDUCATION IN PRACTICE: ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS FROM RISHI VALLEY SCHOOL

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Abstract

This paper explores the practice of ‘Right’ Education at Rishi Valley School, an alternative residential institution located in rural Andhra Pradesh. The school seeks to cultivate a learning environment that resonates with the progressive pedagogical ideas of Dewey (1903) and Freire (1970), yet remains firmly grounded in Krishnamurti’s vision. As Krishnamurti provided no definitive blueprint for implementing his philosophy, Rishi Valley continuously interprets and negotiates its educational practices within both local realities and a broader, transcendental order. Through a one-month ethnographic study employing participant observation, as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviews with teachers and students, this research examines how the ideals of right education are enacted in everyday school life. The central conclusion is that right education at Rishi Valley is not a static model but an ongoing, situated process shaped by the lived experiences, relationships, and agency of students and teachers.

Keywords: Right Education, Rishi Valley School, Krishnamurti, Teacher, Student, agency

Introduction

Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness. (Krishnamurti, 1974)

On the evening of June 19, 2024, as I arrived at the office of Rishi Valley School, a young girl approached me and asked, “Meenakshi Akka has sent us. Do you want to go to the guest

house?" I agreed, and she led the way. From that moment, my hearing of the word *Akka* became a constant throughout my fieldwork at Rishi Valley School, as part of a research project funded by the Shiv Lal Sawhney Scholarship. The project involved immersing myself in one of the Krishnamurti Foundation schools, which are deeply rooted in the ideology and philosophy of the renowned educationist Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). The frequent use of *Akka* during my stay, meaning "older sister" in Tamil, reflected the school's distinctive interactional environment. It was not an intentional effort to reduce hierarchy and authority in student-teacher relationships, but rather an internalized aspect of Krishnamurti's educational philosophy. Throughout my fieldwork, I explored Krishnamurti's vision of 'right education' and how it is practiced by the management, teachers, and students at Rishi Valley, with reduced authority being one of the aspects of this interpretation.

It is to be noted that there are various philosophies of education and are implemented in different educational institutions. One such view to impart education within schools was proposed by Dewey (1906), who forwarded the idea of progressive' education, which has been termed as child-centered learning. To enable child-centered learning, he advocated for freedom in education, which he defined not as freedom of feelings, but as intellectual freedom (Dewey, 1906, p. 199). Dewey also argued that true freedom of the mind can only be achieved when children are allowed to actively engage in identifying their own problems and participating in solving them (Dewey, 1903, p. 201).

Paulo Freire in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), asserted for education along similar lines, to be a dialogic process rather than a unidirectional transmission. He stated, "Dialogue is, thus, an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and

humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants." (Freire, 1970, p. 88-89).

Since its inception in 1918 as Guindy School in Madras, which was relocated to Rishi Valley due to a major cyclone in 1930, Rishi Valley School has aimed to cultivate an approach to education that resonates with the progressive visions of Dewey (1903) and Freire (1970), while grounding itself firmly in the educational philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti. As the driving force behind the institution, Krishnamurti occupies a central role in various aspects of school life. His presence is felt even on the first pages of the school's newsletter, created by the students' newsletter committee, and on the noticeboards. His philosophy is also explored in K-talk sessions[1], where students and teachers engage in discussions, actively interpreting and reflecting on his ideas. Krishnamurti's approach can also be compared to being progressive. It is progressive in terms of being child-centered and emphasizes freedom to be one of its other key aspects in educational practices (Thapan, 2006, p. 46).

Krishnamurti, during his lifetime, was concerned by the fact that education systems worldwide, whether in democratic or totalitarian countries, primarily trained students to conform to societal norms (Krishnamurti, 1986, p. 9). Krishnamurti argued that education should enable students to become complete human beings, rather than merely technological or academically proficient individuals (Krishnamurti, 1986, p. 66). He referred to this holistic vision as 'right education,' which emphasizes the cultivation of "an integrated individual capable of dealing with life as a whole" (Krishnamurti, 1974, p. 15). This approach rejects the compartmentalized method commonly seen in conventional education, where subjects are taught in isolation without

[1] K-talk sessions are the sessions in which there are discussion around the philosophy of Krishnamurti

considering the whole development of the individual. Krishnamurti emphasized the need for both educators and learners to have a free mind to achieve the ‘right’ kind of education. Addressing the concept of freedom, the secretary of RVEC, used the metaphor of a goat tethered by a rope to symbolize how conditioning can limit our freedom. Here, the rope represents societal or personal conditioning that restricts us from exploring beyond a certain point. For Krishnamurti, teachers must first free themselves from these constraints, conditioning, and fear to guide their students effectively. Rather than merely relaying information, teachers should engage in mutual exploration and learning with their students.

Krishnamurti also cautioned against teachers becoming overly dependent on textbooks in classrooms (Krishnamurti, 1974, p. 81). His approach to ‘right’ education emphasizes building relationships between teachers and students based on mutual respect, free from authority or coercion of any kind. He also rejected the idea of competition viewing it as forces that inhibit authentic learning and foster fear, which stifles creativity and intelligence. Another key aspect of Krishnamurti’s vision of right education is the development of sensitivity—not only toward academic subjects but also toward nature, relationships, and life itself. He believed that through this sensitivity, students would gain a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it. When asked about how Krishnamurti’s philosophy is applied at the school, the Principal of Rishi Valley School remarked, "Krishnamurti never left any blueprint, so we have to keep grappling with it," adding that the application of his philosophy is a "thing in progress."

Building on this, I aim to examine how the Rishi Valley School grappled with the practice of 'right’ education (although Krishnamurti himself rejected the idealization of any fixed structure). Specifically, I want to explore how relationships between teachers, students, and the learning

environment evolve in the context of the right education, and the different kinds of interactions and teaching methods that emerge from practicing this approach to education

Research Methods

During my one-month stay at Rishi Valley School, from June 19, 2024, to July 19, 2024, I engaged with the school community through qualitative methods to realize my objective. To achieve this, I conducted participant observation which was followed by semi-structured and unstructured interviews with key individuals, including Principal, Radhika Herzberger (Former Director of RVEC), Secretary of RVEC, Headmistress of Senior school, Headmaster of the Junior school. There were also informal conversations with teachers and students. Since I had stayed in the Rishi Valley guest house, visits by parents were common and hence I had some conversations with parents too.

My mornings usually began with attending assemblies, which I participated in almost every day. To gain a deeper understanding of the school and the interactions within it, I took part in various activities happening in the campus. I attended 24 classes, both academic and co-curricular. Additionally, I joined in on movie nights, documentary sessions, hikes, bird-watching activities, and two club classes. I was also part of newsletter committee meeting, three faculty meetings (focused on humanities and Hindi), and four K-talk sessions. Furthermore, I engaged with students during sports and dance activities, including folk dance on Saturdays. I also made three visits to two of the houses, where I interacted with the students to further immerse myself in the school environment.

It would be interesting through this study to observe how the school grapples with Krishnamurti's philosophy in day-to-day activities, but it first requires the introduction of the Rishi Valley School and its functioning.

Everyday Life at Rishi Valley School

The Rishi Valley School, founded by Krishnamurti in 1926, is currently run by the Krishnamurti Foundation India. It is located in a tranquil valley beneath Rishi Konda Hill in rural Andhra Pradesh, a place where, according to local folklore, sages (*rishis*) once meditated. With about 364 students and 64 teachers[2], including the Director, Principal, Secretary, and house parents, the school operates as an alternative institution The location of the school is approximately 15 km from Madanapalle and 140 km northeast of Bangalore. It sets it at a distance from the outside world materially and also ideologically inspired by Krishnamurti's philosophy.

The school has separate buildings for junior (grades 4 to 8) and senior students (grades 9 to 12), with an average of 25 students per class from 4th to 12th grade, and two sections per class from 6th to 10th grade. As a residential school, it provides houses (hostels) that create spaces beyond the classrooms for students to engage with both teachers and peers outside their immediate classes. These houses serve as spaces for student interaction across different age groups fostering intermingling between grades. In these houses, teachers are referred to as house parents which adds a personal dimension to the formal student-teacher relationship.

Many students begin their day by grumbling about the morning ritual of physical training (McLaren, 1993), followed by breakfast. They are then reminded by a bell to gather for assembly. The Junior and Senior School singing assembly takes place in the senior Audi (Auditorium) on all days except on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The students sit around their music teacher in a circle at the center of the auditorium, with other students sitting in circles around them, often beginning with the *Shanti Mantra*[3]. On the days when the assembly is not combined, it is

[2] Information regarding students and teachers and classes obtained from the office at RVS on July 3, 2024

[3] *Shanti Mantra* is a sanskrit chant, often ending with 'Om Shanti Shanti Shanti' meaning 'peace, peace, peace.

sometimes led by teachers or features students presenting acts, including performances of dances, songs, poetry, plays, or occasionally sessions conducted by alumni.

In one of the assemblies I attended, Class 7 freshers performed a short play for the audience. The play involved many people passing by in a hurry to get to their respective jobs, schools, or other places, and a man sitting in the middle playing the harmonium, which eventually drew everyone's attention. The people around paused and listened attentively. The play offered a subtle reminder to the community about the importance of appreciating the small, everyday moments for a sense of fulfilment. This moment can be interpreted as an instance of students actively negotiating and co-constructing the routine of the daily assembly. The assembly concludes with around a five-minute period of silence, which is embedded in the daily routine. A similar practice of silence is observed during meals in the dining area. When a bell rings, the lively conversations and sounds of students come to a halt, and the entire dining hall observes a moment of collective silence. Another ring signals the end of the silence, allowing the dining area to return to its usual buzz of activity and noise.

After the assembly, students head to their respective classes, which are structured to meet the skill requirements of the ICSE and ISC boards. What goes into teaching the students academically, according to the Principal of RVS, is not static. As children develop, the school needs to be more responsive to the needs of children. Although the content of the teaching may change, “skills are fixed, concepts are fixed”[4] she noted, and serve as the guiding framework for the instructional material. Other than academic classes, the school’s timetable includes other activities such as arts and crafts, like needlework, batik, pottery, painting, and woodcraft. It also features gardening, origami (for 4th-grade students only), yoga, and cultural activities. While

[4] There are certain skill set required to be taught to the student, but teacher can use different instructional materials and pedagogy.

students engage in a variety of arts and crafts, from 9th grade onward, they are allowed to choose activities based on their individual interests.

After the first two morning classes, students are given a break. They eagerly rush back to their houses to snack on *murukku* and have juice, while the teachers gather in the staff room for casual conversations and to receive any announcements regarding the school happenings. After the break, students resume their respective classes until the lunch break. Junior school students, who start their mornings earlier, also finish their day earlier, concluding their post-lunch classes by the evening tea break.

As a residential school, Rishi Valley shapes not only the class schedules but also the entire day for its students. After their evening snack, students engage in various activities such as sports, dance, music, or learning the mridangam. Since they live on campus, there is a dedicated time in the evening called prep classes, set aside for homework and study in their respective classrooms and houses. The day gradually winds down after dinner, when students return to their respective houses for a glass of milk. As the day ends, they often spend time chatting with their house parents and housemates before ending the day.

It is an implicit part of the school curriculum to foster interaction through various other activities, such as bird-watching sessions, hikes, movie and documentary screenings, and community engagement projects, one of which includes visits to the Rural Education Centre. For students in 9th grade and above, there are also clubs and opportunities to participate in folk dance, encouraging engagement beyond the classroom.

Rishi Valley School, while distinctive in its ethos, reaffirms the core values that define its place within the broader network of alternative schools in India. (Thapan, 2006, p. 12). Rishi Valley School, through its structures, does not remain static; instead, it operates as a dynamic space

where both students and teachers actively exercise their agency, even as these very structures are continuously shaped and reshaped by their daily practices.

Each day, while remaining within the same school structure, the practices are continually shaped by how students and teachers interpret them in their own ways. This duality highlights that although certain fixed elements may constrain and guide individual behavior, they are also continually influenced by the actions of the individuals involved. This challenges the traditional view of certain aspects as rigid, external forces, to what Durkheim (1895) described as *social facts*. Instead, it positions them as dynamic processes, continually reconstituted through human action.

In the following sections, I will explore the practice of 'right' education as a structure shaped by the everyday practices of teachers and students. The practice which should focus on engaging students in the learning process rather than simply pushing them toward rote learning or involving a one-way transfer of knowledge. I will begin by examining the role of textbooks at Rishi Valley in the very next section and consider the alternative approaches teachers use. Additionally, I will analyze how these methods vary across different age groups.

The Role of Textbooks: Tradition vs Innovation

"Come with me, we'll go outside," said the English teacher to her class of 4th graders. The students, in uneven lines, followed her to the road connecting the campus to the outside, just in front of the junior school. As they walked, the teacher noticed a caterpillar crossing their path. She stopped and asked, "Do you know what this is?" Some students responded correctly. Nodding, she confirmed, "It's a caterpillar. Be careful not to harm it." They continued ahead, and the teacher asked the students to sit on the road. Some sat down, while others hesitated, complaining about their clothes, the ants, and the dirt. Eventually, everyone sat down. The teacher then took out a book and began reading *The Ugly Egg* with expressive sounds and gestures. The students held no

books in their hands. As she read, she paused occasionally, asking them to describe the characters based on their actions. Once the story ended, she posed a question about freedom, asking how they felt free at school. One student responded by saying they were free to wear colorful uniforms, while another added, “Ma'am, we’re free from our parents’ scolding.” After this discussion, she encouraged the students to lie back and gaze up at the canopy of trees above them. Some hesitated, as they had before, while sitting down, but with a little persuasion, they all complied. The teacher, along with me, laid back as well. There was complete silence on the road. No student got up after lying down. When the bell rang, they were even reluctant to get up, saying they felt comfortable and didn’t want to return to the classroom.

This unconventional approach to teaching and learning wasn’t limited to just one class in Rishi Valley; it extended across other classes as well. Textbooks played a minimal role in the teaching process. Instead, teachers provided printed materials. I observed in the 7th-grade English class where the poem “Ozymandias” was taught through handouts. “Our science teachers are really, really good,” said one 10th-grade student, praising his teacher. “It’s easy to understand concepts with them. They don’t teach from textbooks at all. We just have textbooks for namesake, but we never open them.” A girl from the same class interrupted the very moment, saying, “Excuse me, we do.” After a small squabble about the role of textbooks in subjects like physics, chemistry, and biology, the students agreed that while textbooks are used, they are primarily for practice and solving questions rather than being the main source of instruction.

Rishi Valley, though part of the Indian education system, tries to follow the educational approach where teachers have the freedom to decide what materials to use in developing a lesson. They have authority over what happens in the classroom, and over the resources to be used, printed or otherwise. (Kumar, 1988, p. 452). The textbook being minimal in the classroom, enables the

pupils and teacher to not only interact without a medium but also provides the space to innovate new ways of studying the same subjects. It is said that the use of a textbook reduces the value of the words of the teacher, quoted as

> *If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living word of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils, He himself becomes a slave of textbooks and has no opportunity or occasion to be original. It therefore seems that the less textbooks there are, the better it is for the teacher and his pupils. (Harijan, September 9, 1939)*[5]

The minimal use of textbooks and the adoption of playful learning methods, where teachers innovate to engage students, became a concern for one Hindi teacher who taught both junior and senior school pupils. He expressed that playful learning, particularly in junior classes, had negatively impacted students' ability to read and write Hindi and concentrate during Hindi lessons. His concern focused on how such practices had led to Hindi being undervalued and taken lightly as a subject. While the teachers largely rejected the use of textbooks in junior school, it was difficult to avoid or skip textbooks completely in senior school due to the local order (of examination and being associated to ISC board) in practice (Thapan, 2006). This shift resulted in a more formal style of teaching in senior classes.

In senior school, there was a noticeable variation in teaching styles and student engagement. In one of the 11th-grade Economics classes, the teacher brought a reference document and delivered a lecture on the Land Revenue System in India. He did so without using the blackboard or other teaching aids, relying solely on verbal explanations. The students remained

[5] Mahatma Gandhi, *Harijan*, September 9, 1939 p.261 Accessed from Archive.org https://archive.org/details/HindSwaraj.Harijan.vol7/page/n261/mode/2up

silent throughout the session, writing in their notebooks as the teacher dictated, without asking questions or initiating discussions. The lack of engagement could be attributed to several factors—perhaps the larger class.

In contrast, during an 11th-grade Sociology class, students sat on benches arranged around three sides of the teacher. The teacher fostered more interactive learning by having the students present on "the other side of metropolitan cities." The different teaching approaches in these two cases resulted in varying levels of student engagement, despite both classes being regulated by textbooks.

Nature as Curriculum

The teachers in RVS avoid relying heavily on textbooks. Instead, they use other resources both inside and outside the classroom. Nature is one such resource. It helps break free from the limits of traditional, enclosed learning spaces. At Rishi Valley, nature is not just a place out there. It becomes a space where students and teachers create learning together. It is not only an educational resource but also helps cultivate sensitivity and awareness.

During one of the bird-watching sessions, a Sunday ritual at Rishi Valley, I observed students asking their teacher, Dr. Santharam, to help them identify a bird they had spotted through their binoculars. Some of the students, regular participants in the sessions, were already capable of identifying the birds themselves, while others, who weren't as familiar, sought the teacher's help. The conversation naturally extended to various other topics, such as the nearby tomato fields and the school's former dairy, which had been handed over to the villagers due to high maintenance costs, as Dr Santharam pointed out. On their way back to their houses, one student spotted a dead scorpion on the stairs of the playground, which ignited a conversation about how it might have died. Another student shared an incident from his hostel where he had encountered a snake. He

was happy about his housemates' and house parents' collective decision to save the snake rather than harming it.

Surrounded by greenery, with the constant chirping of birds throughout the day, the school encouraged an environment of closeness to nature. This could be attributed to buildings in Rishi Valley as not imposing structures but rather open fields, with open space at the center and classrooms arranged around it. Without traditional flooring, Rishi Valley's school spaces welcomed ants, fireflies, and even snakes, which created a natural setting enabling students to connect with nature.

The daily routines at RVS, where students engage with nature either consciously through nature-related activities or subconsciously by being surrounded by it, not only foster an appreciation for the beauty of the environment; it also helps them build a connection with nature. This encourages them to think beyond themselves and to rise above their personal concerns as emphasized by Krishnamurti. (Thapan, 2022, p. 48). This visible connection to nature is not new for the current students of the school but it also extends to former students as well[6].

It could be seen that Nature all around also acts as an escape for both students and teachers, offering a space beyond the walls of traditional classrooms. Teachers use the natural environment surrounding the class to build relationships with students, allowing them to step outside the usual routine of daily lessons. In Krishnamurti's philosophy, nature provides a sense of sensitivity, and at Rishi Valley, it also serves as a space for learning and relationship-building, offering both physical and emotional freedom from the structured classroom setting. Nature in this sense acts as

[6] One of the alumni, a journalist sharing with students of class 11th and 12th, reflected on how his time spent in nature at the school until class 10th shaped his awareness of environmental issues, a connection that continues to influence his work today, including his ongoing efforts to address environmental concerns in Mexico.

a medium to reduce the gap between the teacher and students and also between what is academic and what is not.

This dynamic was evident during one of the English classes for 8th grade when the teacher took the students outdoors. Rather than focusing on traditional teaching, the teacher engaged them in a game of “Zip Zap Boing,” where the students stood in a circle and imagined passing an invisible energy to one another. The teacher played alongside the students, becoming part of the game. Afterward, the teacher assigned each student a character to act out for a game called "Party Quirk." In this game, students mimicked traits of characters, while their peers guessed which traits were being portrayed. While the activity did not directly teach the English subject, it allowed students to connect with the teacher and one another. It also helped the students understand the concept of character traits, which is considered essential when interpreting stories in English.

On one hand, nature served as a space for leisure; on the other, it became a learning resource in a 7th-grade geography class, used as a prop to support academic understanding. Class 7, divided into two sections, follows a system where one section studies history in the first semester and geography in the second, while the other section does the reverse. The teacher took the students to a garden field where she decided to teach topography using clay. She asked the students to observe the surroundings at Rishi Valley and describe what they saw. One student mentioned seeing a hill, a downslope, and a valley. The teacher then asked the students to collect clay and bring it back to the classroom, where they would model the hill and learn about its elevation above sea level. Initially, the students were reluctant and concerned about getting their hands dirty. The teacher gently rebuked them, saying, “When we were kids, we used to enjoy these things. Come and do it. You will like it.” The teacher then took the clay to the classroom, placed it on the table, and began modelling the hill. As she did so, she explained the various topographical features,

helping the students understand that things may look different when viewed from different angles. After speaking with the teacher, I learned that her original plan was to teach mapping, but she realized the students had a limited understanding of maps. So, she decided to teach them about map formation through clay modelling. The teacher, in order to engage with the students, used nature as a learning resource.

The teacher through this alternative approach provides students access to varied environments and students get a chance to experience, explore and be creative. This can also enhance students' engagement and internal motivation, leading to a greater willingness to participate (Haraldsson, Göranson, & Lindgren, 2024).

Exposure to nature played a significant role in enhancing students' learning, particularly in the junior classes. In senior school, however, its presence was more limited. Senior students tended to engage more with resources like science labs and the library. However, on occasion, teachers could still be found sitting under trees, conducting lessons in the open.

The role of the teacher as an enabler remained central, not just in helping students forge relationships with their peers and educators, but also in gently nudging them out of their comfort zones. This approach nurtured a sense of community, encouraging students to form meaningful connections not only within the school and beyond but also with themselves, a theme we will explore in the next section.

Learning Through Relationships

It was the usual Monday morning Music Assembly at Rishi Valley. After the assembly, a student from the 11th class approached a teacher who was arranging music books and asked:

S: How is life, Akka?

T: It's good. How is yours?

S: Boring, Akka. Very boring.

T: Why so?

S: We are living like zombies, Akka. Our whole class. So much work

This was a very small conversation, but interestingly, the teacher wasn't the student's class or subject teacher. Rather, she was someone who had shared the same living place with the student during her time at the school. At Rishi Valley, relationships between students and teachers extend beyond formal instruction and classrooms. By living together, they develop deeper connections, embodying Krishnamurti's philosophy of the "right relationship" (Sonkar, 2014). The teacher, while fostering these individual bonds, also helps students form relationships with each other, encouraging a sense of community that extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

In RVS like any other school, every class has a class teacher, and assigning a teacher to this role helps build a sense of community within the classroom. Here, all students relate to each other as companions and also as students of the same teacher. Each class is given one period a week to discuss their issues with the teacher. In one CLT (Class Teacher Lesson) period for 8th grade, which has two sections, one class had a female teacher as the class teacher, while the other had a male teacher. During this session, the teachers decided that all the boys would go to the male teacher, while the girls would stay with the female teacher. The female teacher, holding a piece of chalk, asked the girls to share any problems they were facing, both in general and specifically at school. One girl raised her hand and mentioned that body shaming was a significant concern. Another girl expressed that her strengths were often overlooked. Both issues, they explained, were present both within and outside of Rishi Valley. The teacher, while explaining, acknowledged that such experiences are common for every girl. She also encouraged them to inform a teacher if such incidents occurred on campus. She then asked if they felt safe or had encountered any

uncomfortable situations at school. All the girls responded that they felt safe. This arrangement, where teachers prioritized student comfort, helped some students form connections with other teachers. These connections often extended beyond the confines of single classrooms.

During another Class Teacher session for Class 10, students were taken to the Rural Education Centre (REC)[7], where classes run up to Grade 7 for children from nearby villages. Upon arrival, the REC students greeted the Rishi Valley students with excitement, calling out, "Hi Akka, hello Anna." After receiving instructions from their teacher, the Rishi Valley students paired up with their REC buddies for activities like buddy reading and puppetry. In buddy reading, Rishi Valley students sat in different rooms, helping REC students learn math and reading stories. Meanwhile, in the puppetry activity, it was the REC students who took the lead—teaching their Rishi Valley counterparts how to handle the puppets and perform. Through these interactions, the Rishi Valley students even picked up a bit of Telugu from their buddies. This experience extended relationships beyond the immediate school campus and contributed to the broader sense of the Rishi Valley Education Centre as a community. The Class 10 teacher initiated this visit because, according to her, students tended to chit-chat during class teacher sessions. She believed they needed to develop empathy and learn how to connect with others.

The teachers not only facilitated the students' relationship with other spaces and community members but also encouraged them to build a relationship with themselves. In a Culture class with 4th graders, the teacher led the students to the senior auditorium. Once everyone was seated around him, he reminded them to keep quiet, noting they were very close to the senior

[7] The Rural Education Centre at Rishi Valley focuses on providing quality education to children from surrounding rural areas. Accessed from https://rishivalleyrec.org/our-story/#:~:text=The%20Rishi%20Valley%20Rural%20Education%20Centre%20(REC)%2C%20established,Satellite%20Primary%20Schools%E2%80%99%2C%20and%20two%20%E2%80%98Pre%2DPrimary%20Schools%E2%80%99

school building. He then asked, “What are we supposed to do in this class?” The students responded, “Kindness.” The teacher smiled and said, “I’ll tell you a story today about this, but first, we will calm our minds.” He suggested they begin with meditation.

Guiding the students, he asked them to close their eyes. “When your eyes are open, the mind uses a lot of energy in seeing,” he explained. “So, when you close your eyes, that energy can be used to focus inward and become more aware of your body and mind.” After the meditation, he gave them a simple exercise in mindfulness: “Ask your mind a question— ‘How peaceful are you right now?’ On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very peaceful and 10 is very restless, what’s your number?” The students responded:

Student 1: “Sir, my mind is calm. I feel like a 2.”

Teacher: “Good, very good. 2 is very peaceful.”

Student 2: “Sir, mine went from 3 to 6!”

Teacher: “Maybe you're excited about the game we're going to play next. That's okay.”

Student 3: “Sir, my mind is at 10. It was 9 before, and now it’s 10 again.”

Teacher: “That’s alright, don’t worry. What matters is that you're aware of how you're feeling.”

Student 4: “Sir, mine is a 1!”

Teacher: “Wonderful! A peaceful mind is always a good sign.”

Student 5: “Sir, mine is 5. It keeps changing.”

Teacher: “Yes, the mind does that sometimes. What’s important is to be aware of those changes.”

Student 6: “Sir, 9! But it’s okay now.”

The teacher emphasized that what truly matters is not whether the mind is peaceful or restless, but whether one is aware of its current state. Being mindful, as Neff (2009, p. 212) suggests, is essential because it allows individuals to neither ignore nor ruminate on the disliked aspects of themselves or their lives. The teacher then began narrating the story of *Two Bad Bricks*, conveying the idea that kindness is not limited to being good to others; it also includes forgiving oneself. Being kind to oneself is equally important as it offers soothing and comfort to the self (Neff, 2009, p. 212). The class concluded with a light and engaging game of Chinese Whispers. Through this session, the educator offered his complete attention, care, and affection to create the right environment. He focused on nurturing understanding, something Krishnamurti (1974, p. 15) emphasized as essential so that, as the child matures, they are capable of dealing intelligently with the human problems that confront them.

These instances highlight that a teacher's role goes beyond facilitating academic or social learning; it also involves guiding students toward deeper self-connection. A teacher can create conditions that encourage self-reflection and help students better understand their inner world. In this sense, the school functions not merely as a repository of teachers delivering syllabus-based knowledge, but as a dynamic space for creating and recreating a holistic process of socialization for everyone within the institution (Gogoi, 2014, p. 14).

At Rishi Valley School, teachers navigate a blurred boundary between formality and informality in the classroom. This dynamic can be seen as an extension of the relationships formed within the houses of Rishi Valley, shaped by the school's residential nature. The various dimensions of this rigid place of houses, which becomes a space for both teachers and students (de Certeau, 1980), can be explored in the further section.

Blurring Boundaries

The very structure of residential schooling transforms houses and daily routines into sites of constant observation, reflection, and learning. A staff member who is also an alumnus of the school said, “At Rishi Valley, students are observed at every activity, whether in the dining hall or during the morning prayer.” This extends the institution's disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975) to leisure activities as well as life beyond the school.

The teacher’s role can be likened to that of an actor, constantly performing on a stage (Gaffar, 2022, p. 105). Drawing from Goffman’s (1959) terminology, the classroom can be seen as the ‘frontstage’—a space where teachers perform their formal roles. Meanwhile, there is also a ‘backstage’ to this performance, which includes interactions and responsibilities beyond the classroom, such as those within the residential houses. However, at Rishi Valley, this distinction is not so clear-cut. The boundary between frontstage and backstage becomes blurred, as the role of the house parent often seeps into the classroom, and the role of the teacher extends into the houses.

The blurring line was very much visible during one of the interactions of a 12th-grade sociology student with their art and craft teacher. She was the only one in the needle class. She was making her dress from crochet. The teacher, sitting with her at the same table, was doing her own needlework. The crochet teacher was her house parent from Class 4 to 7. The teacher handed her open tiffin, which had some snacks, to the student. She then mentioned the power outage in the school, adding that there had also been one the previous night. Slowly, the conversation shifted to the student expressing regret over not choosing arts as her subject in 11th grade, saying: “The students who’ve taken art get marks easily. I should’ve taken art—I would’ve scored better. In humanities, there’s never a right answer, you don’t get marks for anything.”

She also spoke about her mathematics anxiety. She said, *"Maths nahi lena—10th ke baad kuch bhi ho jaaye, maths nahi lena hai."* However, she now found herself in a difficult position. She had not taken math, yet her parents wished her to pursue law or management. Both of these required mathematics. Even the college admission process demanded it. She often spoke about her mother and father. There were frequent mentions of the conversations she had with them.

The student also shared the small ways in which she and her housemates resisted the house parent's actions. One of them was when the teacher turned off the fan, the students would protest by lying down flat on the floor in defiance. While the house serves as a space for students to be observed and evaluated by the house parents, it also becomes a significant site of resistance. The students display their agency through small acts of resistance. This resistance becomes evident in subtle ways, such as changes in attire that go against school rules. Girl students, for instance, can often be seen wearing earrings and sporting brightly polished nails.

The houses, while providing a space for interaction between students and teachers, also become a site of burdensome tasks for some teachers, as they are expected to stay active for much of their time. A teacher shared how being a house parent is like "going to work again"—you're never truly off duty. It also requires the teacher to work extra, as was shared by one of the Class 9 Biology teachers, who said, "Typically, a report is a paragraph, about four to five lines, but as teachers gain experience, they can complete one report in about seven to ten minutes. Despite this improvement, the task remains time-consuming. For example, if a teacher has two sections of ninth or tenth-grade students, totaling 50 students, writing 100 reports can take significant time. As a result, teachers often spend an entire month focused on report writing."

The teacher also shared how it is difficult to be a house parent of junior school students. He is currently a house parent of senior school students. According to this teacher, since he has no

family, he doesn't feel the need for the kind of privacy that others might require. This is especially true for house parents who stay on campus with their families. Also, he does most of his reading work while sitting with the students when they are doing their own work. The teacher also looks into complaints made by any subject teacher or class teacher. He also checks if students are eating properly, what their favorite foods are, and so on. The teacher, in this case, acts as a parent.

Another teacher, who has been a house parent at the school for 12 years, shared that, earlier the idea of privacy was not something they thought much about, it changed mostly after COVID. She added, "One needs to have their own space, but when a child needs you, you have to be there too." Some of the teachers are at the school because, although they are not very active in teaching, they serve as house parents, as was shared by the needlework teacher. She said, "*Hum log school mein hai hi isliye."*

The houses are not simply the spaces where teacher and students interact both formally and informally but are also the spaces which foster cross-age friendships and deep social bonds. Students from different age groups interact daily, sharing meals, chores, and stories, cultivating a sense of community that transcends academic hierarchies. In many ways, the house becomes a microcosm of the school's values—spaces where learning, care, resistance, and growth unfold together.

Making Room for Vulnerability

The school, through its everyday practices, strives to approach the boundary of "right education," where learning is not one-dimensional, and meaningful connections are formed between teachers and students. Academically, RVS has consistently achieved outstanding board exam results. The director noted that teachers devote additional time to support students in the lead-up to exams, with some students even achieving perfect scores in certain subjects. At the same

time, the school has actively intervened in shaping its curriculum to reflect Krishnamurti's educational philosophy, ensuring a balance between the local context and a broader, transcendental order (Thapan, 2006). However, the daily realities present another dimension to this philosophy of right education.

When asked about the introduction of computer studies as a compulsory subject, the principal noted that some ex-students had expressed concerns about their typing speed, which affected their performance outside the school environment. In addition, with various competitive entrance exams such as the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering institutes, the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical students, and the Central University Entrance Test (CUET UG), RVS does not place significant emphasis on preparing students for these exams. As a result, some students leave after 10th grade to seek institutions that are more aligned with their academic and career aspirations. This was reiterated by a Class 12th student who said, “We have only seven people in our batch who’ve been here since Class 4. Some left because of competitive exam preparation, while others left because they didn’t like it here.”

The emphasis on minimal competition at Rishi Valley adds to the philosophy of right education. One Class 12 student noted that even though students begin receiving marks from the 9th grade, they rarely remember each other’s scores. “We don’t really compete with each other,” she said, “because we’ve not been brought up that way.” Rishi Valley teachers do not follow a formal grading system, but there are instances where teachers acknowledge that they do calculate scores to assess which students are paying attention or engaging with the material. One teacher also pointed out that comparison is inevitable when it comes to evaluating students. A class 8th math teacher shared, “Sometimes, as a teacher, parents may approach you with curiosity about their child’s standing compared to others in the class.”

The absence of competition among students at Rishi Valley School, while fostered a non-comparative and nurturing environment, but at times led to anxiety about life beyond its boundaries. A Class 12 student, seated in the library, voiced her concerns about transitioning to the outside world. She shared that she was preparing for the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) but felt uncertain about how she would navigate the highly competitive atmosphere beyond RVS. Having been at the school since Class 7, she asked questions about college life, how people interact, and what to expect, reflecting a sense of unfamiliarity and apprehension about what lies ahead.

Although Rishi Valley School strives to maintain a distinct identity within the broader education system, the classroom environment at times continues to reflect conventional schooling practices. In classes 9 to 12, the pedagogical approach often becomes exam-centric, prioritizing board exam preparation over deeper, reflective learning. For instance, during a Class 12 Sociology session, the teacher focused on potential board exam questions, remarking, “By the end of the year, you will have your question bank ready.” Similarly, in a Class 9 History lesson on the war of Mewar, the discussion was cut short with the explanation, “It is not part of our syllabus.” Such instances highlight the tension between the school’s educational ideals and the practical demands of standardized assessments.

“Experts and their knowledge can never replace the parents' love, but most parents corrupt that love by their own fears and ambitions, which condition and distort the outlook of the child” (Krishnamurti, 1974, p. 34). Some parents choose to send their children to Rishi Valley School, inspired by Krishnamurti’s philosophy and also the school’s emphasis on overall development. However, this can also create situations where students feel isolated or pressured to meet the expectations set by their families.

For instance, a student who had joined Class 9 just a month earlier was struggling with homesickness. Her parents had been receiving weekly updates about her well-being and had also received letters from her asking to return home. Despite her discomfort, the parents hesitated to take her back, mentioning that their relatives had advised them against withdrawing her from the school. In an effort to help her settle, they decided to stay on campus for a week.

During their visit, the parents shared their appreciation for various aspects of the school, including its assemblies and the distinctive approach to school attire. They observed how confident, composed, and neatly dressed the students appeared, even in the absence of a formal uniform. Their remarks reflected a belief in the school's approach and a hope that their daughter would eventually adjust and benefit from the environment, despite the emotional difficulties she was facing.

Students, too, express complex feelings about home and school. Some feel that their lives at RVS offer greater freedom in comparison to home, primarily due to the absence of direct parental supervision. As one student observed, "We have more freedom here because there are no parents to scold us." This perceived autonomy may, on one hand, create a sense of independence, but on the other, it can also deepen feelings of emotional disconnection from family.

The emotional toll of this transition is evident in the experiences of younger students. A class 7 student shared, "I miss my parents a little too much, maybe because no one likes me here." When asked why, the student added, "Maybe I am too fat, or maybe the students in my class think I am always wrong." Another case involved a class 7 student who left the school after a brief stay. As the headmaster of the junior school explained, "She tried for two to three weeks, but was unable to cope. You have to share your space, adjust to the hostel environment, adapt to a new routine

and different food. Some students, especially those accustomed to non-vegetarian food, find it hard to adjust. Some children leave. But it's fine, it takes time for many of them to settle."

Rishi Valley School, as a *place*, provides the physical and institutional setting grounded in the philosophy of Right Education. However, the *space* of the school is actively produced and reshaped through the diverse actions, agency, and everyday negotiations of students and teachers (de Certeau, 1980). While students express themselves through adaptation, resistance, or withdrawal, teachers bring their own interpretations and pedagogical styles into the classroom. This interplay generates a lived educational *space*—fluid, relational, and constantly evolving—where the practice of Right Education is not merely implemented but reinterpreted and extended in situated, everyday contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the philosophy of *Right Education* at Rishi Valley School and examine how its implementation is shaped by the agency of teachers and students, alongside the everyday practicalities of school life. Rooted in J. Krishnamurti's vision, *Right Education* aims at fostering both academic excellence and psychological freedom. Its practice at Rishi Valley manifests in varied teaching methods, which are adapted according to the needs of the students, the grade level, and the dual responsibilities teachers take on—as both educators and house parents.

The study traced how textbooks are used sparingly, with nature becoming a dynamic space for learning. It discussed how relationships and a sense of community emerge from the pedagogical approach, especially through the close interactions between teachers and students. The paper also reflected on how residential life, including teachers' roles as house parents, turns the home into a site of continual observation and learning. Finally, it addressed the tensions that arise when

students transition out of this nurturing environment to prepare for competitive examinations, often stepping away from the ideals of *Right Education*.

One limitation of this study lies in the lack of in-depth exploration of students' psychological experiences, particularly their anxieties and pressures. Time constraints also prevented engagement with former students, whose perspectives might have provided valuable insights into the long-term impact of this philosophy.

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