

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN PRACTICE:  
INSIGHTS FROM RISHI VALLEY SCHOOL**

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## Experiential learning in practice: Insights from Rishi Valley School

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### Abstract

*This paper is an analysis of the way experiential learning is implemented and expressed in Rishi Valley School, the alternative learning environment that is based on the philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti. The intent in conducting the study is to get to know the various pedagogical strategies that extends beyond conventional classroom teaching practices. The study is methodologically grounded in one-month field research which was based on participant observation of classrooms and outdoor activities, informal interaction and in-depth interviews with teachers. According to the findings, Rishi Valley pedagogy is highly experiential in nature where learning takes place through outdoor fields of exploration, hands -on activities like woodcraft, needle work, batique art, music and dance among others, and also classroom discussions that make students think critically. The relationships between teachers and students turn out to be the main focus of this process and they are characterised by mutual trust, attentiveness and breaking barriers of hierarchy. The connections produce secure emotional environments where curiosity and imagination can flourish. Moreover, the natural setting of the school serves as the living classroom so that the students study the ecological processes first hand rather than through the textbook. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of John Dewey’s philosophy of “learning by doing” and experiential learning cycle by David Kolb as these two theories help to realize the manner in which the knowledge emerges from the interplay of observation, reflection, and action. As part of the Krishnamurti’s holistic educational thought, Rishi Valley represents a kind of progressive education which directly opposed to the conventional, exam oriented schooling. While the mainstream schools are focused on memorization and standardized tests, Rishi Valley has*

*shown that experiential and child-centered pedagogies develop in-depth knowledge and interest, providing critical insights into how progressive education can be developed in India. However, this study also uncovers subtle challenges faced by teachers in implementing experiential learning in practice. Finally, it highlights pedagogical paradoxes which offer a critique of the school, questioning its scalability within the broader Indian education system.*

## **Introduction**

"On my first morning at the Rishi valley school, just after the assembly dispersed, I noticed a small group of junior school students sitting around a small water pot placed in the open area. They were intently observing tadpoles in the water, some even gently dipping their hands in, to scoop a few tadpoles and watching closely. One child pointed excitedly, *'Look! That one's chasing the yellow one!'* Another leaned closer, whispering, *'They're called guppies... see how fast they swim?'*

This moment marked my first glimpse into the culture of experiential learning at a residential school known as Rishi Valley located in the middle of the nature in rural Andhra Pradesh where learning comes naturally as a result of observation, interaction and curiosity-driven exploration. This paper attempts to take a field trip through junior school classrooms at Rishi Valley as well as provide a very cursory overview of one of its satellite schools to see how experiential learning is put into practice. It aims to explore the pedagogy and resources that shapes activity-based learning, as well as revealing the subtle challenges that teachers face to implement such practices. As the investigation goes further, it also reflects on how the teacher and the student relate to one another where trust, dialogue and inquisitive learning become silent enablers of learning-by-doing. Further, the study extends to the **MGML (Multi-Grade Multi-Level)** approach embraced in satellite schools, examining its vision, implementation, and its compatibility with the overall objectives of experiential education.

Finally, paper highlights some of the structural challenges in implementing these progressive pedagogies on a broader scale within the Indian education system.

Rishi Valley was established on Jiddu Krishnamurti's philosophy of education, focusing on self-discovery, learning by observing and child centered education. He prioritised holistic learning, as opposed to academic learning. He stressed that "Education is not merely acquisition of knowledge, gathering and correlating facts; it is to see the whole significance of life as a whole. (Krishnamurti, 1974, p.6). At Rishi Valley, the absence of strict academic pressure and the freedom from examinations until Class 9 create a fertile ground for experiential learning to thrive. The learning in this intelligently planned space is not dictated by the hour hand of the clock or the pages of a syllabus but is given the opportunity to run its course through the questioning process and practical involvement. Krishnamurti stated fear is what prevents the flowering of the mind, the flowering of goodness (Krishnamurti, 1974, p. 36).The fear of marks does not motivate children, but the sense of discovering things, whether it is tracing the patterns of a leaf, tackling a math problem in real life, or pondering about human values in culture class. The loose curriculum of the school promotes cross-disciplinary discovery, and students are free to make connections between the subjects, to approach the ideas in a meaningful way. Krishnamurti's vision goes beyond child – centered learning to a more challenging idea to develop a 'reflexive mind' that is constantly processing and questioning. (Thapan, 2018, p.303). Although there is an implied freedom, there is a slight balance of a feeling of discipline and mutual respect, and students are able to be responsible of their own learning without external coercion. Further, the classroom setting that I was exposed to was very liberal and student centered. Contrary to the conventional set up where students are meant to sit down and remain silent and passively taking notes, in this case, students were actively participating, moving around, observing soil samples, laughing, cracking jokes, asking questions. This type of classroom atmosphere seems to me as a

colourful learning atmosphere where students were comfortable and enjoyed learning. It is indicative of a forward looking attitude towards education wherein the experiential and inquiry based method enable the students to build their own knowledge by engaging with the real world. Education in this kind of environment is an experience and not a training to work in a machine as Krishnamurti claimed that “the modern day education is a total failure since it has been too much focused on technique. We ruin man in being too technical. Not to know life, not to have a complete perception of the ways of thinking and of wanting, will only serve to make us more ruthless, that is, to breed wars, and incur the physical insecurity of our being. The sole development of technique has resulted in the creation of scientists, mathematicians, bridge builders, conquerors of space; but are they cognizant of the complete life process? Is it possible that any expert will live as a whole? When, no longer, he is a professional”(Krishnamurti, 1974, p.18). At Rishi Valley, the physical and relational environment together play a vital role in nurturing experiential learning. The school is placed in an environment that is full of nature, and where there is a possibility for silence, slow exploration and reflection. Moreover, the classroom layout and carefully designed outdoor spaces also promote experimentation and creativity. This physical environment is paralleled by the school's focus on human relationships, particularly the non-hierarchical and trusting relationships between teachers and students. Thapan (2018), argued that teacher- student relationship here is the open quality of interaction without fear or prejudice. Such relation is based on egalitarian rapport which rests on conversation and dialogue rather authoritative (Thapan, 2018, p.21). These bonds enable learning without fear of failure, encouraging students to experiment, question and reflect. The natural environment and the conducive relationships create a unique ecosystem where experiential learning is not only promoted but becomes the default mode of learning.

This experience prompted me to reflect on the shortcomings of traditional schooling, and to embark on a journey to better understand experiential learning, not merely as a learning approach, but as a mode of being, one that promotes critical reflection and the capacity to live life in its entirety. In this process I draw on John Dewey's concept of education as the reconstruction of experience and David Kolb's learning cycle to understand how observation, dialogue, experimentation and reflection are integrated in Rishi Valley classrooms. This provides a framework for understanding how these learning environments are enabled, what pedagogic decisions enable them and how they differ from the status quo of contemporary schooling.

### **Theoretical framework**

Experiential learning theory (ELT) is a rigorous way to analyse the pedagogical approach in Rishi Valley School formulated by David Kolb (2013). Experiential learning stresses the fact that knowledge is not passively received but actively built through the transformation of concrete experience into knowledge. Students get to interact with the reality. This practice is in stark contrast to the usual approach of traditional, lecture-based education wherein the knowledge is mostly delivered in isolation of the context in which the learner is actually living. In Rishi Valley, learning takes place as a part of day to day life, nature based activities and self-directed projects and this is based on the premise that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. (Kolb, 2013, p.38). John Dewey in his seminal work, *Experience and Education* (1938) provides a philosophical foundation for this approach. According to Dewey, education was a process of living and not preparation for future life, and the free activity, the individuality and the interaction with the present realities are important factors to focus on. The school’s emphasis on exploration, observation, and participatory activities resembles Dewey’s vision of education as in close

contact with real life. Furthermore, when Dewey required reflective thinking, he made sure that experience is not only sensory or emotional, but one that is critically analysed to yield significant learning outcomes.

The theory of cognitive development provided by Piaget also plays a role in defining the idea of experiential learning. According to Piaget “Intelligence is not an innate internal characteristic of the individual but arises as a product of the interaction between the person and his or her environment. And for Piaget, action is the key” (Kolb, 2013, p.12). Thus, the development of intelligence is a result of interaction with the environment and action is the primary way in which knowledge is built. Children in Rishi Valley are motivated to move beyond from passive learning to act, experience and experiment in order to have concrete involvement with phenomena before they begin to construct abstract knowledge. This approach is directly related to Piagetian stages of development. It is a technique that also enable children to act as little scientists participating in self-guided discovery and creating intrinsic motivation, interest, and problem-solving abilities.

The contributions of Paulo Freire (as cited in Kolb, 2013) further enrich this framework with dialogical learning and praxis. The process of learning is a two-way, democratic process involving the active participation of students in the process of interpretation and transformation of experiences. Teacher-student interactions at Rishi Valley are related to this philosophy, where the educators provide the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue with students, who are encouraged to doubt, analyse, and do something significant in the surrounding world. The reformulation of the knowledge base of experience-based participatory learning is remarkable in the critique of the “banking concept of education” where ideas are deposited in learners’ heads (Kolb, 2013, p.28).

Experiential learning cycle, in which Kolb presents concrete experience, reflection on experience, abstract conceptualization, and experimental action offers a feasible paradigm to comprehend the way such theoretical viewpoints converge at Rishi Valley. An example of this is nature walks and practical projects where concrete experience is gained, and then these experiences are discussed and reflected on to allow critical observation, conceptual insights are developed through the relationships between students experiences and general principles, and finally applied to follow-up projects or problems solving tasks. This kind of integrative approach connects learning with personal growth with practical application, and leads to not only cognitive growth but also emotional, ethical and social growth.

### **Methodology**

This ethnographic study was conducted over a month long fieldwork at Rishi Valley School, located in Andhra Pradesh, from 15th June to 15th July 2025, where I explored the implementation of experiential learning practices in a residential school setting. I started the fieldwork on the very evening of my arrival, mainly using participant observation as the core approach.

In the first week, I focused on understanding the overall functioning of the school, its curriculum, and building rapport with teachers and students while hanging out with them in the campus in free time and also during lunch at the dining hall. This initial phase was essential for contextual grounding and establishing trust, which later enabled the deeper engagement.

Over the course of the month, I conducted participant observations in 25 classes, spanning both academic subjects (such as science, language, and social studies) and co-curricular activities (such as music, art, and nature study). This was bolstered by my attendance at

morning assemblies which exposed me to essential insights into the school as an institution and its functioning. I delved deeper than observational to the semi-structured and formal interviews. This was with teachers across grades and subjects. The conversations did much to show the personal philosophies of teachers towards engaging students and the larger vision of a “fear-free” classroom. My involvement in school’s reflective culture included attending faculty meetings, the monthly Krishnamurti talks and also four Sunday Dialogues which are open-ended inquiries in which students and staff engage. In the final week of fieldwork, I extended my research to the school’s outreach activities where I visited the Rural Education Centre and a nearby Satellite School named ‘Valmiki Vanam’, both of them practice the Multi-Grade Multi-Level (MGML) methodology. Moreover, during these visits, I also interacted with villagers and local educators to understand the community’s relationship with the school and its pedagogical practices.

Informal interactions also played a significant role in this research. I joined kids from junior school to their way to dining hall and hostels, and engaged in numerous informal conversations with students, which offered spontaneous reflections on their lived experiences at the school.

As senior school curriculum was more focussed towards board examinations and structured academic routines, my primary focus remained on the Junior school students because senior schools had less scope for the kinds of experiential practices this study aimed to explore.

As a researcher, I recognize that my observations are not neutral but are influenced by my own educational trajectory and social location. Having spent my academic life within the conventional Indian schooling system which is characterized by rigid hierarchies, a "banking

model"<sup>1</sup> of knowledge, and the high-pressure environment of examinations, and constantly carrying a sense of fear from teachers, my entry into Rishi Valley prompted a significant "pedagogical culture shock.". Initially the freedom which I observed there felt revolutionary because it was so different from my background, which creates a potential of Awe bias in my research where earlier I gave a heightened emphasise on the schools liberating attitudes .

### **Learning beyond classroom**

In Rishi Valley School, learning has not been limited behind four walls of the classroom. My one month fieldwork experience evidenced that the school proactively fosters knowledge in the form of real-life encounters and self-directed learning beyond formal learning institutions. Its landscape with its tamarind trees, hills, birds, stones, and open skies is not only picturesque beauty but acts as a co-teacher at the school. And in this context a different learning environment appeared that questions the mainstream version of schooling and reinvents the teaching- learning process. There was no demarcation between the real classroom and the external environment. This sub- theme discusses these other learning spaces and their functions in the holistic education.

One afternoon, when I was in a painting lesson, I observed a group of Grade 9 students sitting in the open air, drawing sketches of Gulmohar leaves that were put in front of them. Some of the students had sat down on a stone wall a little way off, and were using their own shoes as subjects, having placed them purposefully on the ground. This was an effective but simple exercise of drawing what surrounded them in real life in a sharp contrast to traditional classrooms where art is generally done by copying pictures in a textbook, instead of looking at the world around and perceiving it. This art education reflected the philosophy of John

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<sup>1</sup> Banking model of education introduced by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). It critiques education as an act of "depositing" where teachers fill passive students with information, stifling critical consciousness and reinforcing social hierarchies. Freire proposes "dialogical" or "problem-posing" education as a liberating alternative.

Dewey who argues that education should be based on experience, believe that the conventional schools tend to develop an opposition between knowing and living that reduce learning to an abstract and purely intellectual process. According to him democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life (Dewey, 1938, p.34). This natural environment, lack of pressure, and the freedom to select one's own object set the stage in which learning arise from the learner's own interest, not from the teacher's instruction.

This emphasis on inquisitiveness and direct experience was equally visible in a situation where students of Grade 6 got so excited that they ran down to a Gulmohar tree. One of them said, *Akka<sup>2</sup>, where is the Gulmohar?* Teacher smile and said, *You are standing right under it.* This was not an isolated conversation but was a nature walk in their EVS class. Instead of scolding, correcting or dismissing the student, the question was answered with a lot of gentleness in a manner that respected the student in terms of his curiosity and observation. This experience exemplified the concept of concrete experience of David Kolb - the initial stage of experiential learning cycle. The pupil was not being instructed in a diagram of a tree; he was being exposed to it visually, and physically. His query arose out of his presence in the space rather than a lack of theoretical knowledge. Such encounters with doing, feeling and experiencing are real learning as postulated by Kolb. Then it passes to reflective observation (what did I see?), abstract conceptualization (what does this mean?), and active experimentation (how can I do this the next time?). The environment at Rishi Valley offers endless conditions of this cycle to be starting off without coercion and compulsion, and in many cases, even without the awareness of the process on the part of the learner.

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<sup>2</sup> In the local languages of Telugu and Tamil, "Akka" translates to "elder sister". The use of kinship terms rather than formal titles like "Sir" or "Madam" is a deliberate pedagogical choice at Rishi Valley . It serves to diminish the traditional classroom hierarchy and foster the "fear-free" environment envisioned by Krishnamurti.

Such a connection to the nature is not accidental but it is systematically promoted by the architecture and pedagogy of the school. As mentioned in Krishnamurti journal of 2019 that In Rishi valley, the trees on the school campus are as much as part of the ‘architecture’. They provide their own benchmarks and sculptural spaces to explore (Mariam 2019, p.19). I observed several open areas including stone benches under the trees, shady areas in courtyards, where classes frequently were held. When I inquired about teachers as to why they like to take students out, most of them echoed my sentiments: *It keeps them awake, the airing helps them relax, it makes them feel less anxious, and sometimes children open up more when they are not inside four walls of the classroom.* The selection of learning spaces outside was not romanticized but real and based on the emotional aspects of the learners. This is also a direct extension of what Krishnamurti thought of education as a process without fear and rooted in psychological awareness. According to him, education is a process that does not entail the accumulation of knowledge but the development of intelligence, sensitivity and inner clarity. He was of the view that strict school uniforms, examinations, strict schedules tend to instil fear, competition and conformity (Thapan, 2018, p.43). Conversely, flexible classroom, which is sensitive to the time of day, state of students, and landscape around, provides room to pay attention, be receptive and explore nature in an inquisitive way. This sensitivity to emotional rhythms at Rishi Valley was also apparent in the way of day-to-day outdoor classes, as well as in the response of teachers towards the energy of the students. The process of learning was not a forced but it is invited.

This offer to learning was once more evident in a Sunday birdwatching exercise. I observed three Grade 5 students with matching binoculars enthusiastically pointing to birds and butterflies and nearby tamarind trees. Their conversation involved shapes, colours, movement, and posing questions to each other. One of them approached the teacher and said: *“Akka, how can I know which bird is male and which one is female?”* At that particular

moment, There were no textbooks, just observation and dialogue. Deep learning was occurring in this unstructured and spontaneous environment. Dewey is of the opinion that natural impulses and desires always serve as the starting point for learning, but true intellectual growth requires that these raw impulses be reconstructed and remade and should be respected and directed and not suppressed or turned aside result in the attainment of true intellectual habits (Dewey, 1938, p.64). In this birdwatching activity, the teacher was not imparting literacy as she was in-service with the students in their observation and association. The classroom was devoid of walls and there were no limits just sky, leaves, birds and endless development of curiosity.

The blending of curriculum and nature was greater in the Environmental Studies teaching. In one article of Krishnamurti journals (2017) named Learning with Wonder: Environmental Studies for the Young mentions that the EVS curriculum is aim to enable the learner to build skills of observation and reflection from experiences that are in context, then move towards abstract concepts, once the skills of observations are internalized which is the foundation for learning . So, the EVS program of Rishi Valley does not just depend on books alone that it relates to the overall natural landscape. I observed one teacher demonstrate parasitism using an example of a tree by the side of the classroom that had an entangled parasitic creeper. He neither used a projector nor a white board. Rather, he demonstrated the phenomenon the way it was in real life and then requested the students to tell him what they observed. From that concrete encounter, the lesson expanded into discussion, classification, and conceptual understanding. Kolb's next stages abstract conceptualization and active experimentation were visibly unfolding. Students were not passive observers. They connected what they saw to what they had read, and then revisited the same tree a few days later to track changes. This cycle of returning to the same object or question again and again, in different lights and

moods is a hallmark of experiential learning. It does not aim for finality or closure but deepens understanding over time.

The moment that I observed, maybe the most profound one, was during a silent sitting exercise. A teacher requested the students to sit quietly under a tree. There was no purpose, or task just quiet presence. The teacher then inquired, after the time, what one had observed. They were sensitive and intimate responses: *I heard birds, I felt the wind, I could smell the ground, I felt peaceful*. Other students confessed that they were unable to sit still very long and their minds were not concentrated. Even this was admitted without being judged. The teacher made them observe their distraction, to learn when they were restless themselves. This was not an exercise of behaviour control it was an exercise of developing awareness as a silent mind is an empty mind imparts a sense of sacredness which is similar to a French term 'eclat', meaning clarity, radiance and beauty. Silence, for Krishnamurthy is not imagined nor induced by authority, or by meditation, it is a natural outcome of an examined life. (Thapan, 2018, p.71). It was the moment in which the students were not learning facts but attention, under the tree. They were entering into a mode of living present, motionless, and conscious of the world.

When summed up, these moments form a rich tapestry of what learning beyond the classroom indeed be. In Rishi Valley, the landscape is not supplementary to education but is at its core. The learning process does not happen in the top-down way but is observed, reflected on, discussed, and experienced. Educators are not teachers but facilitators, co-travellers and silent companions sometimes. There is no hurry, no crowded schedule, no compulsion to act but there is richness, articulateness and motion. This is not a process of learning in jolts of stress or cramming but a process that builds gradually, and in actual experience. The child is not something that can be filled in but something that needs to be

awakened. It is not because trees form part of the curriculum by design alone, nor that every silence, every call of the bird, makes part of the curriculum. It is a school, and learning starts and ends at the classroom door it is in the walk back to the hostel, in a chat under a tree, or in the questions which still remain after the bell has rung. It is not learning outside the classroom it is learning liberated out of the classroom, learning as life.

### **Teacher student relationship**

The teacher student relationship in the quiet and pedagogically alive environment of Rishi Valley school is the core of the learning process. According to Krishnamurti, the bond between teacher and student is of delicate relationship composed of the dimension of freedom, order, and hierarchy. It's not the presence of these dimensions but their unorchestrated absence that is necessary to strengthen the bond. (Thapan, 2018).

This bond was well explained during one of my first observations when I was attending a music assembly. When the students were about to create noise prior to the assembly, even the simple “*shshhh...*” of the teacher silenced the whole auditorium not because of any form of coercion, but due to mutual understanding. Some students in a corner were still chattering and instead of scolding them, the music teacher went there with a mild smile on his face. The students also stood up straight away in a jovial manner and sat down not in a state of fear, but rather in a state of warmth and respect. This communication was not an exercise of power but a silent expression of trust and connection.

The theme was similar in various classes and spaces, as mistakes were perceived as part of learning process. Educators never scolded or spoke loudly. Rather, they employed reflective practices in order to make students internalize their mistakes. For instance, when a student interrupted a class, the teacher calmly responded, “Let me know once you are done talking,”

signal awareness without humiliation. When these happened, the teacher was not just dealing with behaviour but with moral reasoning and self-awareness.

This could not be better brought out than in the dance lesson when students were at liberty to practice their moves. The teacher did not correct an individual immediately when he or she made a mistake. Rather, the students were nudged about to see what they felt was right, which frequently prompted them to correct or learn from each other. Dewey suggests that education should be in contact and should enlarge experience. This is the very flexibility provided by teachers at Rishi Valley, which gave students that freedom of trial, error, introspection and development.

The teachers at Rishi Valley did not just teach; they lived and shared the same learning with the students. I also often observed how kids would go up to teachers anywhere across the campuses and sit under the trees, go through a hallway and ask questions or express interests. During a given moment, I overheard an economics teacher consulting with her student attentively and with passion he requested the student to tell her which part of the concept she is finding problem to understand. This close interaction, which is characterized by genuine care, promotes deep learning since it makes the academic process personal and validate student struggle.

In one of the junior assemblies, there were some disruptive students. The instructor did not scold or hit one of them. Rather he merely pointed to the three of them to sit beside him in the middle. This silent statement of being and control was a subtle reminder and a means to be included without being humiliated. This was always about getting the students reinstated into the learning process as opposed to isolating the students.

Even though the student-teacher relationship at Rishi Valley seemed to be relaxed and friendly, it is not totally without order. There was always a soft power which was one that was free and responsible. The teachers provided students with freedom and demonstrated accountability. This equilibrium plays a key role in the establishment of a secure environment where the learners feel supported, as well as responsible.

This was one of the most touching moments when I had to talk to a clay art teacher that had been working in Rishi Valley and had spent 28 years there. When I inquired on what motivated him, he just mentioned that these little children were his motivation. His eyes were shining with love and meekness. During his lesson, I saw how children just worked with clay and chatted, giggled and teased each other. He passed through them in a kind of fatherly manner which did not obtrude, but was ever present. He used to say intermittently, *shall we attempt to do it like this, or can you explain to me why this part fell off?* The strategy will develop creativity, but also critical thinking and confidence.

I observed that students had a profound feeling of freedom in all the classes I got in. They laughing, moved around, and even talked all together at the presence of the teacher. This was not a sign of indiscipline but it was a place where students did not feel like hiding themselves. There was a general tendency of the use of inclusive language by teachers, such as, How many of us can do this? Rather than telling them to do something. Pedagogy of participation is evident in the usage of we and us which implies that the teacher is not an authority figure who is isolated but rather a co-learner. This collective work in the classroom leads to what Paulo Freire described as dialogical learning a process of mutual discovery by dialogue and relationship.

A single playful example helps to grasp the gist of such approach in one of the physical education lessons, when a teacher decided to conduct a small race among students. They were

all racing and laughing. This was no mere game but it was a relational pedagogical moment. Learning, in this case was not only intellectual but was embodied, joyful, and collective.

A Hindi teacher once shared with me her philosophy: “A teacher should be accessible and available to students 24x7 not just for academics, but also for their emotional needs.” This statement echoed through every corner of Rishi Valley. Teachers were not only content facilitators but emotional anchors. I saw teachers comforting sad children, joking with them over meals, and quietly noticing when someone was feeling left out.

Classrooms here were different from conventional schools. They often resembled interactive spaces almost like play areas where learning naturally unfolded. Children played, danced, did mistakes, argued, and most of all, questioned and this leads to the right kind of education which is not a means of conditioning the individual rather it is helping her\ him to be mature and free; to flower greatly in love and goodness (Thapan, 2018, p.23). Moreover, learning works best when the learner is emotionally safe and comfortable. This synergy can be seen in the relationship between the Rishi Valley teacher and the student. Emotional attachment does not reduce academic rigor rather it enhances the confidence, motivation, and curiosity of the learner. The respect, playfulness, trust and guidance that was observed in these relationships not only provided an environment that was conducive to learning but also reflected the democratic and humane principles that the school is aimed at promoting.

Rishi Valley provides an example of the world where relationship is curriculum, with education becoming more and more competition-driven, benchmark-driven and controlled. It is in the informal conversations students are being able to ask, to challenge, to think, to get the teacher to laugh, all these little, often unnoticed, interchanges that true learning sprouts. It is this network of mutual exchanges, the little corrections, the laughter together, the free conversation through which children are learning not only content, but life.

Finally, teacher student relationship at Rishi Valley is not the plan it is a lifestyle. It is a daily exercise of faith, affection, and being there. It is in this connection that learning turns out to be more than mere fact memorization it is a common experience of becoming.

### **Activity classes**

The next most interesting feature of the Rishi Valley curriculum is the emphasis on activity based classes, like woodcraft, dance, needlework and painting. These courses that are usually considered as secondary or decorative in the standard education sector, here become key areas where students learn through practice. The pedagogical approach reflects the essence of experiential learning, the emphasis is not merely on outcomes but on the process and reflection involved in the act of creation. The teachers are the key to the development of this ethos. As mainstream schools rarely value art and craft, there is no funding or acknowledgment of it. Rishi Valley on the other hand offers complete support and resources. Such institutional support, as well as the desire of the teachers, will guarantee that creativity is not a peripheral concern but rather the main theme of the curriculum.

### **Woodcraft: Building Skills through Hands-On Engagement.**

My first point of observation in activity classes was the woodcraft lesson of middle school students (Grades 6 and 7). The classroom was rugged and it was minimally polished with wooden materials, instruments, and had safety facilities like a first-aid box. Students were divided into groups that rotated every two months across different activity-based subjects, ensuring exposure to multiple crafts.

The teacher's approach exemplified experiential pedagogy: he began by asking students what they wished to create, whether a keychain, sword, bowl, or even a miniature guitar and the choice was left to the students. Planning and imagination was the first step of the process

since students were asked to draw their designs first. The introduction of the newcomers to tools was by engaging students through interactive questions- What is this used for? how to use it safely, while giving reminders to keep the body away from chisel. The teaching style promoted curiosity, decision-making, and responsibility. Errors were not punished but rectified by guidance and this encouraged self-reliance and confidence. Individualized attention was also supported by the presence of an assistant. This approach from a sociological perspective is a reflection of the thought of Dewey's idea that education must be rooted in real-life activity, where learning is generated through problem-solving and reflection.

### **Dance: Channelising Energy and Cooperation.**

Another aspect of learning experience was demonstrated by evening dance classes. At the time of my observation, students were learning a Russian folk dance. The instructor showed the step move by move and demonstrated how it should be done himself and then allowed students to imitate him. I noticed, there was a lot of laughter and occasional chaos in the classroom environment which teacher handled with patience and humour. Students were left to figure out directions, clockwise and anticlockwise learning not only the dance steps, but also cooperation and coordination in the process.

During interview the teacher defined dance as a way of channelling the energy of teenagers and teaching them cooperation. This brings out a latent role: on the one hand, students view the dance class as a leisure activity, on the other hand, it leads to discipline, collaboration, embodied learning as well. These communal performances foster solidarity and connect students together through the rhythmic collective engagement and create a feeling of unity.

Interestingly, music is also not confined to the formal classes: during school assemblies, teachers also sing with students, eliminating the concepts of hierarchy and presenting the learning process as a group, joyful activity, not as a top-down one.

### **Needlework: Patience, Precision, and Creativity.**

The atmosphere in the needlework class was vibrant and resource rich, with colourful threads, needles, even a charkha placed in the corner of the room, which symbolically connected the activity with the cultural and historical spirit of India. Students were immersed in the sphere of crochet and embroidering cloth. In this case, learning is practical not only in the technical context but also in patiently learning, focusing and practicing aesthetics. The art of needlework dissolves the boundaries between ability and art as between practicality and imagination. Such activities are commonly gendered or marginalized in mainstream schools as hobbies, whereas in Rishi Valley they are given centrality and their relevance in the school restates the alternative educational philosophy.

### **Learning and Painting out of Nature.**

The painting class which I observed was based on the principle of learning from the environment. Students were sitting outside and drawing leaves, shoes or other natural items set in front of them. The nice weather and open environment provided a less stressful mood, which minimized anxiety and promoted the creativity of observations. In contrast to the traditional art education where the creativity is often limited to textbook exercises, art in this case was closely tied to nature and individual experience.

The Headmaster of Rishi Valley spoke about the purpose of such classes and he said that he would assist the students to venture in various fields and in case they develop interests, then they even could make their career based on these talents. The school spirit consequently

acknowledges that schooling is not merely a pre-exam preparation but a setting out of possibilities.

### **Pedagogical Approaches and resources-**

One of the most defining features of Rishi valley is its unique pedagogy and method of teaching which focuses on experiential learning rather than rote learning. Here teachers do not only transfer information rather emphasise on methods which includes – thinking, feeling and doing. This process makes students an active listener which helps them to reflect and apply the learned concepts in everyday life through which study becomes itself a lived experience.

### **Learning Through Thinking, Feeling, and Doing**

In Rishi Valley Experiential learning is not just a theoretical abstraction but a concrete reality. During interview one of the EVS teachers shared her method of teaching in three parts: *Thinking* where she asked probing questions to encourage curiosity and inquiry, *Feeling* where students were made to sit quietly in silence and experience the sensation of stillness, and *Doing* where children engaged in nature walks or observed plants and animals directly. This triadic model echoes David Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which emphasises a movement through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. And the most striking part in this approach is the teacher's language, the words like "us" reflected a sense of oneness and shared experience, which diminishes the distance between teacher and student. It reinforced J. Krishnamurti's philosophy that the teacher is not a figure of authority imposing knowledge but a co-traveller in the process of discovery. In this way, the pedagogy emphasises that

knowledge is constructed not in isolation but collectively, through interaction with both people and the environment.

### **Differentiated and Inclusive Pedagogy**

The other major pedagogy which I observed in the Hindi classes is the effort to classify students depending on their learning levels. The students were classified into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. For beginners and intermediate learners, the teacher used audio-visual methods and worksheets to teach, while encouraged advanced students to write and interpret. This approach to teaching and learning is an example of a pedagogy that recognizes individual differences rather than enforcing homogeneity. Here, small class sizes (19-20 students) were advantageous. Even when children made chaos, teachers did not lose their emotional control neither punish rather, they were patient and used gentle dialogue. This is in line with Krishnamurti's vision of paying attention to one's emotions, recognising them, being aware of them and dealing with them becomes an important component of pedagogy (Thapan, 2018, p.23). This echoes Paulo Freire's denunciation of the "banking model of education" that considers students as objects of education and instead embraces his call for a participatory, or dialogic learning.

**Integration of Real-Life Contexts and Critical Thinking-** Rishi valley's pedagogy always make an integrated connection between classroom teaching and lived realities. for example - in History lessons, abstract textbook topics such as civilizations or international conflicts were linked to current affairs, geopolitics, and moral questions. When teaching about the Iran-US conflict, History teacher moved beyond factual explanation to ask students value-based questions: What does peace mean for human life? Why is it significant? In doing so, the classroom became a space not only for learning facts but for cultivating ethical reflection and perspective-taking. This is in tune with what Krishnamurti argues is that education is to

create new values. Education is highly intertwined with present world crisis and the educator who sees the cause of this universal chaos should awaken intelligence in students, thus helping the coming generation not to bring about further conflict and disaster (Krishnamurti, 1974, p.25). In the sciences, teachers used local and readily available materials for experiments. For example, while teaching the topic of Friction in Physics class, students were asked to collect sand from outside the classroom, and make a use of tables, and pencil boxes for doing experiments instead of expensive lab equipment. Similarly, in the junior school science lab, soil experiments invited children to handle test tubes themselves, where one student remark, that *“I feel so scientific while holding this test tube.”* These moments demonstrate how John Dewey’s principle of “learning by doing” comes alive in practice. This integration of concepts with develops critical consciousness, encouraging students to see knowledge as interwoven with social, political, and ethical realities.

### **Experiential and Creative Engagement-**

At Rishi Valley, teaching practices encourage creativity, imagination and multi-sensory learning. For instance, in Mathematics, odd and even numbers are introduced to the students through stories, patterns and colours, which helps to stimulate curiosity before moving on to abstract ideas. This practice is in line with Dewey’s emphasis on imagination as the starting point to reflective thinking. In English lessons, group work such as Edward de Bono's "Six Thinking Hats" exercise helps students to find solutions to problems from emotional, logical, creative and critical points of view. These encourage divergent thinking and problem solving, a vital part of experiential learning. Literature classes, both in Hindi and English, emphasized student imagination. Instead of copying what they had read, kids wrote their own versions of plays or stories, and teachers helped them do this. The students were given time to write on their own so they could say what they wanted. Also, showing off student-made projects, like

models of Egyptian civilization in classrooms, showed that in this culture, learning is validated through making things and sharing them with others.

### **Assessment as Ongoing Observation**

Instead of taking exams as in the case of mainstream schools, Rishi valley follows a distinctive – continuous assessment process through students’ participation in the discussions, their creativity in project work and their engagement in asking questions in classroom. One teacher said - *“It is not about the result, it is about the process; there is no right or wrong.”*

This philosophy resonates with Kolb’s notion of iterative learning<sup>3</sup> and Krishnamurti’s insistence that education should liberate rather than constrain. By decentering exams and outcomes, assessment here becomes a tool for growth and reflection. Students are encouraged to take time, explore, and internalize concepts through their senses and experiences, rather than rushing toward standardized answers.

### **Creating a Fear-Free Environment and Freedom to Express**

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Rishi Valley pedagogy is its grounding in Krishnamurti’s philosophy of freedom. He argues that there should be creation of a learner friendly environment by fostering a competition free atmosphere and an environment free from any system of reward and punishment. But there must be a fine balance between freedom and discipline so that students does not fall into trap of conformity while on the other has a sense of order in everyday life. It is also in tune with Dewey’s idea of democracy in the classroom, where students act as active participants in a community of learning. In letting students discover freely and introspecting on their own behaviour, teachers are not

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<sup>3</sup> Iterative learning defines knowledge creation as a continuous process through the transformation of experience. This involves a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation, where each cycle informs the next to deepen understanding.

only engaging their students intellectually but also emotionally and ethically. And so, Rishi Valley becomes a laboratory for experiential learning, where teaching is not about imparting knowledge but facilitating holistic development.

### **Challenges faced by teachers in facilitating experiential learning**

Experiential learning is a core pedagogical principle of the school, but teachers recognised that there are challenges involved in implementing such an approach in the classroom. One common difficulty, according to a science teacher, is to make abstract concepts meaningful for students, especially when lessons are not pre-determined, but emerge from concrete experiences. Another teacher noted the initial period of transition for students, and explained that the freedom provided to students often makes teaching a challenge without pre-established rules, strictures or discipline. In this context, the challenge is to balance freedom with guidance. Teachers noted that freedom is key to experiential learning but must be continually negotiated so that students do not become distracted by multiple and competing interests. Moreover, a number of teachers noted the physical and emotional demands of teaching in this context, as facilitating experiential learning necessitates intense attention, flexibility and stamina, as lessons are not predetermined, and require responding to students' feedback and interests

### **Multi grade Multi level methodology**

Classroom observations at the Rural Education Centre and the satellite school Valmiki Vanam show how the Multigrade-Multilevel (MGML) method works in practice. The classroom moves away from textbook-centered teaching and focuses on activity-based learning. Materials like papers, alphabet cards, and subject-specific items (Maths, Telugu, EVS, art and craft, poems) are placed at the children's height. Students of different ages and

levels participate in different activities, which is a characteristic feature of MGML methodology. This method of teaching involves a single teacher who teaches multiple subjects through group-centred instruction rather than teaching the whole class. During the lesson, some children read in their groups while others read individually. Children in the early grades learnt the letters with tamarind seeds, emphasising the use of local resources in activity based learning. Texts are largely replaced with graded activities, which are colour-coded and sequenced. This enables children to progress according to their ability, rather than age. These observations show that MGML changes the classroom layout, teacher roles and teaching materials to respond to varied needs of rural classrooms. By shifting away from linear, grade-based instruction towards activity sequences and self-paced learning, MGML turns challenges like teacher shortages into a model focused on the needs of students. (Singh , 2024).

### **Pedagogical Paradoxes**

Rishi Valley school works as a living laboratory for hands-on learning, but a closer look reveals contradictions about its structure and social role. The schools natural environment serves as a co- teacher and highly influences the teaching methods and practices but, this freedom to explore on its own comes with a cost, it requires a resource-rich setting mainly big tracts of land, natural environment and more importantly low teacher-student ratio which is not possible in mainstream education system where often it lacks a playground for students and packed with high density classrooms. Hence, this kind of pedagogy is not only a philosophical choice rather it highly depends on the material abundance of a school. Another major contradiction is that students' high social profile often contrasts with school's philosophy of free and fair environment During participant observation in various classrooms, I noted that students in Rishi valley often exhibits a high degree of confidence.

The school attributes it to a fear free environment but Pierre Bourdieu's perspective suggests it reflects their cultural capital, their high confidence in asking questions, exploring and making mistakes emerges from their Habitus – views and behaviours shaped by their elite background. Interestingly, it contrast with the Krishnamurti's thoughts that education must be free from conditioning. While students' social position does play a role but a major portion of transforming experiential education in practice depends upon the high affective labour of teacher. They are required to be accessible, present and keep emotional control throughout the teaching learning process. In contrast in the standard education system where discipline comes from authority and teachers are not much motivated to teach due to high indulgence in administrative tasks, sustaining this level of emotional intelligence becomes a significant challenge. Apart from this, high level of affective labour and creative pedagogy, the school's unique educational bubble eventually encounters the rigid, unavoidable reality of state-mandated examinations. In early years, especially in junior schools students are exposed to hands on learning but as soon as they transition to senior school their focus shift towards state regulated board examination which ultimately creates a structural contradiction.

In the end, the "Pedagogical Paradoxes" of Rishi Valley demonstrate that alternative education is not only ideologically driven but also a consequence of material wealth and class privilege. The school's aim to break free of conditioning is offset by the students' inherited cultural capital (Habitus)<sup>4</sup> and the emotional work of teachers, making it hard to replicate. In addition, the ultimate compromise with board exams<sup>5</sup> reveals that even the most progressive

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu defines Habitus as a system of durable, transposable dispositions—structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures. In this context, the "confidence" observed in students is not merely a product of the school's pedagogy but is reinforced by the Cultural Capital (non-financial social assets such as education and style of speech) inherited from their elite family backgrounds

<sup>5</sup> While the Junior school (up to Class 8) operates under a "lose curriculum" free from exams, Rishi Valley is affiliated with the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) . Students eventually transition to the standard ICSE (Class 10) and ISC (Class 12) curricula, creating the "structural contradiction" discussed in this section.

"educational bubbles" cannot break free from the competitive pressures of the global labour market, making the freedom it provides both short-lived and constrained.

## **Conclusion**

This research was an attempt to understand experiential learning in practice at Rishi Valley School, moving beyond a pedagogical rhetoric towards an understanding of learning as it happens in school. The study involved a month-long ethnographic inquiry into classrooms, activity spaces, outdoors, and teacher-student relationships, to explore the role of experience, reflection and dialogue in teaching learning process. The research did not view experiential learning as a discrete method but as an immersive process embedded in relationships, spaces and institutional context.

Rishi Valley's pedagogy is found to be multifaceted. Out-of-classroom learning, activity-based pedagogy and teacher-student relationships based on trust do not operate in isolation, but complement each other. The school's environment is used as a resource for teaching, classrooms are treated as a space for exploration. Teacher-student relationships that are attentive, conversational and "fearless" create the emotional context for children to experiment and make mistakes, putting their learning into practice. These factors combine to stimulate long-term interest in learning.

Theoretically, the research shows how experiential learning theories intersect. Dewey's experiential philosophy, Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Freire's pedagogies of dialogue converge with a Krishnamurti's holistic approach to education that emphasises freedom, consciousness and integrated growth. Far from these being theoretical silos, they converge in the pedagogy of Rishi Valley in ways that suggest experiential learning is more effective when it addresses cognitive, emotional and relational aspects of learning.

However, the study also illustrates the nuanced complexities of teaching experiential learning. The pressure of freedom and control, pace of learning and demands for emotional and physical labour in responding to student needs are felt by new teachers. These complexities point to the fact that experiential learning is not a simple alternative to "normal" schooling, but a challenging pedagogical approach that calls for institutional support, as well as teachers' passion and dedication for teaching.

This study is constrained to the case of one school, but it provides insights into the potential of re-enchanting schooling in India. Rishi Valley should not be interpreted as a model of education that can be replicated, but as a case that shows how education can shift focus from the test-driven, fear-based pedagogies to a humane and reflective learning. By privileging experience, relationship, and environment, the study adds to sociological discussions about education through showing how learning can be made to focus on attention, responsibility and life itself.

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