

**EDUCATION BEYOND BOOKS: EXPERIENTIAL
LEARNING IN THE VALLEY SCHOOL, BANGALORE**

AYUSH KUMAR SINGH

2025

WORKING PAPER SERIES 2025/1

This paper is an outcome of the Shiv Lal Scholarship which is awarded every year to M.A.(P)
Sociology students of the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

EDUCATION BEYOND BOOKS: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE VALLEY SCHOOL, BANGALORE

AYUSH KUMAR SINGH

Abstract

This ethnographic study critically examines The Valley School (TVS) of J. Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) as a deliberate counter-institution. It challenges the hegemonic Indian education system which is characterised by intense social stratification, competition, and a focus on extrinsic validation. To analyse how the Experiential Learning Method (ELM) and the unique social organisation of the school operate as specialised mechanisms of alternative socialisation, this research employs an interpretive qualitative approach. The school operationalises Krishnamurti's philosophy that focuses on replacing competition with collaborative inquiry and self-knowledge. However, this research also uncovers a critical dissonance: while the non-competitive environment successfully cultivates a fear-free mind, it creates an anxiety for senior students who must transition into the highly competitive world. This article argues that the experiential learning method serves as a methodological bridge that is not merely for academic retention but as an inner fortress that nurtures the individual to survive in modern society without internal conflict.

Keywords: Experiential Learning Method (ELM), J. Krishnamurti, Socialization, Critical Dissonance, The Valley School

Introduction

The Indian education system is mainly characterised by its focus on standardised academic stratification and hierarchies. It includes intense competition, and the outcomes that are

quantifiable as high marks, material success, and professional prestige. This dominant educational model exerts immense pressure on students. It shapes pedagogical practices towards extrinsic validation and conformity. However, there are some narratives that exist in the form of alternative methods of education.

It is necessary to look critically at the hegemonic system that the Valley School opposes to understand it. The mainstream education system rarely functions as a site of enlightenment but more as a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The Indian education system became commodified in the post-liberalisation era. In the mainstream education system, there is a hierarchy being made by the rank-based assessment of the students. It works as a tool of social stratification. The exams (CBSE/ICSE, etc.) create a curriculum of rote memorisation, obedience, and intense individualism. The colonial roots of the Indian education system are designed to create clerks, not thinkers (Kumar, 1991). This creates an educational environment defined by ‘strong classification and strong framing’ (Bernstein, 1975). The teacher maintains the absolute authority over the students and transmission of knowledge, and the boundaries between subjects are rigid in this system.

The Valley School represents a radical rupture against this backdrop of high-stakes competition, where success is narrowly defined by getting good ranks or admission into elite engineering and medical colleges. Krishnamurti’s philosophy posits that the educated mind conditioned by fear and ambition is destructive (Vedaparayana, 2002). Therefore, The Valley School attempts to answer a profound question: Is it possible to socialise a child in a modern society without exposing them to the competition? In this article, I will investigate one such ideology-based critical counterpart of traditional learning/teaching methods: the impact of the Experiential Learning Method (ELM) within the context of the J. Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) schools, specifically focusing on The Valley School (TVS) in Bangalore.

Methodology

Ethnography is never an objective view from nowhere, but it is an interpretive act. As a researcher from a mainstream school/university background, I entered the field expecting to see proper classes and memorisation-based teaching. Instead, I found myself in a space where these definitions were fluid. This idea of an educational institution was totally new for me. So, an interpretive qualitative research design was employed for this research, utilising a focused ethnographic lens to gather rich, in-depth data regarding pedagogical practices and student perceptions within a natural school setting. This method is helpful to explore the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of experiential learning, curriculum, and the role of freedom and enquiry in the educational environment.

My presence as an adult researcher/observer caused what sociologists call the ‘observer effect’ in the Junior School initially. Students immediately shifted their attention when I entered the “*Bhuvi*” (a mixed-age group) classroom. They asked, “*Who are you?*”, “*Why are you here?*”, and “*Why are you writing?*” This initial interaction with the students prompted me to reflect on how to build rapport and be a part of them to conduct the research effectively. This required me to abandon the silent observer approach and adopt a ‘participant observer’ role. I started participating in their daily school life. I sat with them, ate with them, and participated in the ‘circle time’ (where they come up with their personal thoughts). This approach reduced the social distance between me and students as well as teachers and allowed me to access the field and hidden aspects of their student life that a distant observer would miss.

This research was done through a four-week fieldwork, designed to ensure systematic data collection and analysis. Participants, including the principal, staff, and students, were selected via purposive sampling based on their direct involvement with the experiential learning methods under investigation. Field notes were recorded in the diary on a daily basis to capture

the ‘thick description’. The collected data includes approximately one month of participant observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers, informal conversations with students, teachers, and some of the non-teaching staff. As this fieldwork was of four weeks duration, four weeks are too brief to definitively track long-term psychological transformations.

Experiential Learning in the Valley

The KFI educational paradigm rejects the conventional priorities of the mainstream education system. Its main focus is on self-knowing and fundamental psychological transformation, aiming to foster a human being free from fear and conditioning (Anand, 2020; Krishnamurti, 1974). This article aims to examine if ELM, in practice, can successfully eliminate the tension between the necessity of mastering skills and the achievement of intelligence, as conceptualised by Krishnamurti.

The experiential learning method focuses on a learner-centric approach where acquisition of knowledge is an ongoing, active process that is based on the concept of learning by doing (Malik & Behera, 2024). It is philosophically rooted in Jean Piaget’s constructivist perspective, where Piaget saw the learner (child) as an active builder of knowledge, and John Dewey’s pragmatism, where Dewey explored the fusion of practice and theory through critical reflection and active engagement (Malik & Behera, 2024).

This method, formalised by David Kolb, Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, includes a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation. This four-stage cycle provides the structured framework for tracking the transformation of experience into knowledge (Malik & Behera, 2024). ELM is not a modern adaptation for efficacy, but it is the essential, deliberate operationalisation of Right Education (Anand, 2020). While the outcome of the educational practices of conventional schools is assessed through comparative, quantitative metrics, TVS mandates that ELM must

realise its intended ideological outcomes centred on wholeness and intellectual freedom (Anand, 2020). It allows students to intellectually grow at their own pace. Krishnamurti's philosophy expands the definition of concrete experience to include continuous internal psychological states. It ensures deep personal relevance by making internal conflicts like fear and ambition the starting point of the learning cycle.

Transcendence and Tradition: The Unique Context of The Valley School

TVS serves as a strong example of alternative education in contrast to traditional schools. The goal of TVS is to foster the comprehensive growth of each individual (Lahon, 2016). The KFI approach to teaching actively addresses the main institutional barriers to successful experiential learning, eliminates competition, encourages smaller class sizes, connects academic content with real life, and prioritises qualitative, ongoing assessment (Anand, 2020). This bubble effect (Dore, 2014), by providing a controlled environment, theoretically maximizes the potential of experiential learning, because no outer influences can affect it. Competition is eliminated, and the fear is negated inside the bubble. The intentional creation of a sanitised bubble (Dore, 2014) serves as a necessary mechanism to shield students from the hegemonic Indian education system. The school successfully fosters a fear-free mind within a controlled environment by deliberately isolating students from comparative and rank-based assessments.

This isolation inevitably invites a delayed but severe dissonance. Some of the students experience an ontological shock when students leave this bubble, and exposed to the highly stratified reality of the Indian higher education system after the 12th grade. The collaborative and non-hierarchical socialization that they have internalized suddenly clashes with the external world's rigid demand for extrinsic validation and intense competition. However, students are acutely aware that they must leave this bubble eventually. This bubble effect also leads to a situation where students of higher grades (11th and 12th) find themselves in a

dilemma. When I asked a group of 12th-grade students about their future plans, some of them said that they were preparing for JEE/NEET to get admission to engineering/medical colleges; one 12th grader stated, *"I know I have to work twice as hard to compete with mainstream students, as the cut-off for top colleges is so high. If I do not compete, I will not get in. By keeping me away from the world full of competition, is the school setting me up to fail?"* This anxiety acts as a primary catalyst for a notable rate of academic dropout (and taking admission in other schools) during the critical transition into the 11th grade. This dropout takes place taking into consideration the reality that 'they must work twice as hard to compete with mainstream students whose entire academic socialization has been geared toward rote-learning and competition', as stated by some of 11th and 12th grade students. They leave The Valley School not because ELM has failed to nurture their cognitive abilities, but because they realize the system fundamentally disadvantages them in the quantitative metrics of Indian college admissions. This dropout rate reveals a severe structural vulnerability. While the school successfully dismantles the fear of failure internally, it cannot dismantle the external societal structures that penalize non-conformity. While earlier analyses suggested a sharp dichotomy, Thapan (2006) notes that the boundaries between these orders have blurred, and students and teachers continuously learn to negotiate their way through the dilemmas and contradictions of the transcendental and local orders in everyday life. Rather than a strict clash, there is a complex fusion where participants actively negotiate and strategize to navigate the school's aspirational values alongside external societal influences. Experiential learning is very successful in improving affective outcomes (such as intrinsic drive and humanitarian ideals) as well as cognitive abilities (such as problem-solving and mathematical proficiency) (Uyen et al., 2022). As the psycho-social counterbalance to the conditioning and fear-based competition that Krishnamurti criticized, the affective outcomes such as the development of increased critical consciousness and self-knowing are essential (Anand, 2020).

Literature provides the highly valuable insights into the ideological tensions of TVS. But the fundamental question remains empirically underserved: How does the ELM mandate non-competition and self-knowing and translate it into measurable intellectual autonomy and self-awareness in such a system where students must prepare for the highly competitive external world? In this article I will provide a qualitative analysis that investigates the dual impact of ELM and its influence on conventional academic preparedness alongside its success in fostering the distinct, noncompetitive, psychological traits mandated by J. Krishnamurti.

Dissolving Boundaries: Environment and Infrastructure

This school is situated on the outskirts of the city of Bangalore and adjacent to BM Kaval Forest, Karnataka. It seemed a different world when I first entered the Valley campus. It establishes the campus as an intentionally created community and a sanitized bubble from the urban environment. It was surrounded with nature; I was able to clearly hear the birds chanting and also see blooming flowers and green trees. When I walked forward inside the campus, I saw the office first; it is a modern single-storey building but surrounded by plants and trees. A small lotus pond was inside in the courtyard of the office; it signifies that this campus is very sensitive about nature and puts every effort into its conservation. They named all the places after nature.

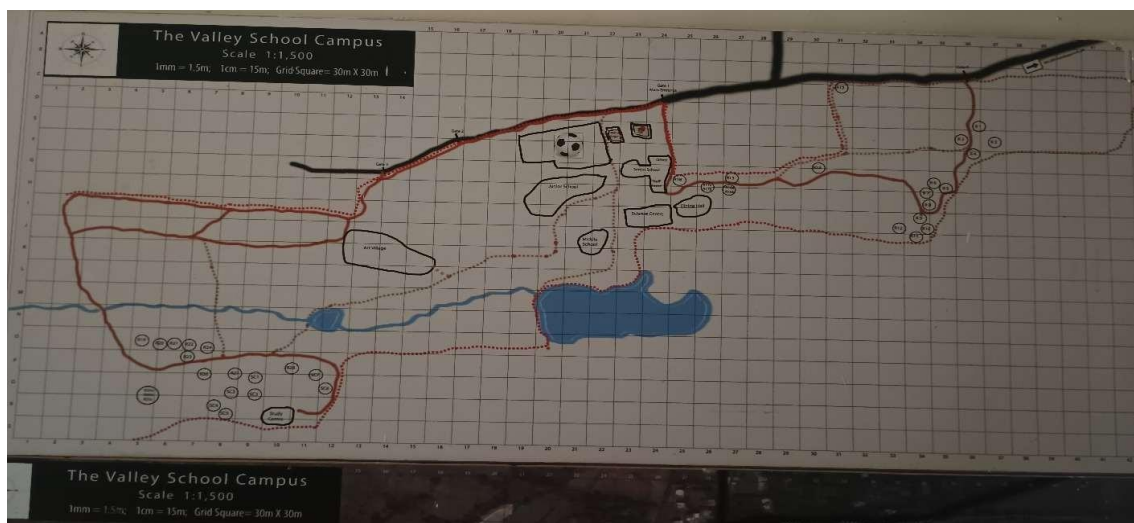


Figure 1: Map of The Valley School Campus (available at Office, TVS)

There is a KFI study centre (marked as “study centre” in the map) inside the campus; its architecture, specifically the absence of chairs and use of carpets in place of them, is a deliberate rejection of traditional architectural settings that enforce control and hierarchies. This setting encourages an egalitarian, more relaxed and self-directed atmosphere for learning. There are a significant number of books of various categories, including religious texts alongside secular books, which signifies a commitment to cultivate a holistic knowledge which includes a spiritual and philosophical inquiry.

The Valley School is divided into three parts. Junior School (1st and 2nd-4th Grade – mixed age groups), Middle School (5th-7th Grade), Senior School (8th-12th Grade) Junior school classrooms were named as different names of earth (*Bhuvi, Ila, Mahi, Medhini, Oorja and Prithvi*). All the middle school classrooms are named after a constellation. *Mahasagar* (at the right side of football ground) is the place where daily morning assembly happens. It is a large open hut some steps away from the main gate of the school. All the students gather here every day in the morning for assembly. Now talking about the school campus, it is spread out over 17 acres. There are so many trees on the larger part of it. Some manmade lakes are also inside the campus. One more interesting place is Art Village (a place where pottery, music, theatre, art, and handicraft classes happen). This place is approximately 500-700 meters away from the classrooms; on the way to it, there are so many trees on both sides, and also the path is not of concrete. Students with their teachers or without them walk towards the art village when they have classes. The time spent in going to the art village from the school is not dead time but a sensory immersion that prepares the mind for the creative work at the art village. By situating the art village far from the school, the architecture creates a sanitized bubble in the school. It reinforces the school’s ideology of interconnectedness. These art village classes are compulsory for all the students, whether they are students of junior or senior school. Classrooms of the Junior School and art village are not like modern classrooms; they are hut-

shaped but made of concrete. These classrooms have large open windows; from those windows, when students look outside, they see trees, plants and flowers. Because this campus is adjacent to BM Kaval Forest, this campus is a home for so many bird species and animals. This linguistic ritual reminds students of the school's core value that is interconnectedness with nature and an identity that is a part of a larger cosmic whole, not just an urban-centric material one. The physical infrastructure, surrounded with nature, is designed to dissolve the boundaries between the human and nature. This transforms the environment into a co-teacher.

The architectural design of the school operates as an active agent of socialisation of students; it deliberately dismantles the physical structure of control. This type of architecture rejects the rigid model and surveillance-heavy corridors of mainstream schools. The Valley School employs a model that successfully counters the hierarchy. This attempt to counter the hierarchy is visible in the no-chair classrooms of the Junior School, the dining hall, and the KFI study center. Teachers are the ultimate source of authority in mainstream schools. The architecture physically eliminates the vertical hierarchy that typically elevates the teacher above the students. When a teacher sits on the floor to eat or discuss something, the physical intimidation of authority is neutralized. It fosters the psychological safety required for students to engage in fearless inquiry and impactful experiential learning.

This school is a day school till 10th grade; after that, it is compulsory for students to stay in the hostels situated inside the campus. There are two hostels inside the campus; one is for girls and another for boys. This compulsory stay for the senior students (11th and 12th grade) in the hostel introduces some elements of a total institution. Some teachers are also residents of these hostels, and unlike other hostels where a warden/caretaker takes care of the students, here in the valley, they are called hostel parents (school teachers). This creates a blurring of authority and dissolves the rigid staff/inmate dichotomy. This mechanism aims to create a more pervasive and softer form of social control rooted in familial bonds rather than a hierarchical and

authoritarian one. Unlike conventional hostels, four students stay in each room, and the relationship between students and hostel parents is not formal, it is informal. There is a dining hall in the campus. Food is prepared here for all (students, teachers, non-teaching staff, and school bus drivers). This dining hall is not equipped with chairs and tables, rather there are mats and low-heighted tables. Students and teachers have the meal together. There is no policy of eating with spoons, they all eat with hands. When I asked a teacher (sociology teacher) regarding the philosophy behind it, he explained, ‘eating with hands allows you, to feel the texture of the food through finger tips, make sense of it. When you eat with spoon, you can never feel it’. It highlights eating as a sensory engagement that aligns with school’s pedagogical on direct experience. Some students serve the food and clean the tables and fold mattresses. These duties change daily on the rotation-based. All are asked to wash their plates by themselves. This kind of activity creates a sense of maintaining the self-care and also makes them sensible. This practice is a powerful communal ritual that deliberately dismantles the typical social hierarchies based on age, status, or grade; it promotes affective solidarity and equality.

Assembly- cultivating sensitivity

Unlike mainstream schools, assembly happens in an open manmade hut (*Mahasagar*) that is adjacent to the playground of the school. The *Mahasagar* ensures that this daily ritual is not sealed off from nature. Daily assembly represents a deliberate rupture from the disciplinary norms of the mainstream education system. Mainstream school assemblies often follow a system where students stand in linear, militaristic rows facing a raised podium, a formation that enforces hierarchy and surveillance. The Valley School’s assembly is different; students sit together in a circle heading towards the center of it. It dismantles the senior-junior, student-teacher hierarchy. Students and teachers sing songs related to nature and culture from different languages and regions. This practice creates a collective effervescence (Durkheim) and also

transmits broad culture of different regions. In assembly students play some classical musical instruments, and teachers guide them, it seems like an assembly cum singing/music session.

Library: Reading for Pleasure, Research, and Thinking

Like other educational institutions, the library is a central, shared space in the valley, where students spend time to get the pleasure of reading, knowledge and help for their classroom assignments. But the thing that makes the Valley School's library unique and different is that this is not a traditional, quiet library; instead, it is a vibrant space that allows students conversation, games, and laughter. The librarian's philosophy is that learning does not always happen in silence; it sometimes needs discussions. TVS's philosophy directly challenges the hegemonic cultural norm of a library as a space of silence and peace. It creates a vibrant, conversational space and builds a trust and shared experience and makes learning a collective rather than competitive endeavour.

The library also organizes some activities and group games. Librarian organizes a book relay, where a single book is passed from one student to the next in the group. This activity is based on trust and shared excitement, and this book relay often features popular genres like graphic novels. The book relay activity transforms the act of reading into a dynamic experience, aligning directly with the experiential learning method. This mechanism of passing books to one another operationalises trust (a core tenet of the school's philosophy) as a practical learning outcome. The relay requires students to engage in active experimentation. They must trust each other to maintain the pace and care for the shared book. This eliminates the competitive mindset often found in the mainstream schools. The book relay is not just a game but a pedagogical intervention that proves that intellectual engagement is deepened by social connection.

The Valley School's library program is structured in a way that there are three key types of reading to encourage students to engage with a wide range of books related to their curriculum

and many more. These three types of reading take place in different stages. First, students are exposed to the books (sci-fi, fiction, stories, comic books, etc.) that give them pleasure. This type of reading is for all age groups, from the youngest students of the valley to the oldest, and this reading for pleasure mainly focuses on entertainment and enjoyment while reading. It makes students comfortable with books. When they start enjoying the books, they get exposed to reading for research. This kind of reading begins in middle school; now students use the books for classroom assignments, class tests and for their academic work. Something similar happens in senior school also, but it becomes more intense as they learn about research, presenting and referencing. This intense kind of reading starts in class 9th; for this, the library also holds some sessions to teach 8th-grade students how to use the library for maximum benefit and also how to research a topic. Now the third kind of reading, which is reading to think, begins in a later stage, where students get encouraged for deeper engagement with fiction; for this, the librarian told me that he uses a 'mirror and windows' approach. In this, books act as mirrors, and in these mirrors, students see themselves reflected in the characters of the book. Books also act like windows; looking through these windows, students gain insights into the lives and experiences of others. This approach fosters empathy and a different way of thinking in students, and it operationalises Krishnamurti's distinction between learning driven by utilitarian motives (such as fear or ambition) and genuine 'love for learning' (Krishnamurti, 1974). Students are liberated from the motive of academic accumulation by engaging with the books not for examination but for introspection. Krishnamurti (1974) argued that it is the love for learning that motivates students to find 'something new'. The library, in this way, transforms into a space for the unconditioned discovery rather than a repository of information.

This library's book acquisition process is a thoughtful and collaborative effort to ensure a diverse collection of books in the library. Book lists are created with inputs from teachers and

students both. In the year 2025, the library specifically asked students who live in the hostel to create a list of books that they want in the library; this encourages their engagement with the library. Also, a library committee of the teachers reviews all book suggestions and also removes irrelevant or redundant titles and decides what to purchase. This activity assures the relevance and diversity of the books that are available in the library.

The librarian asked students to do a project reading the world. In this project students map the global narratives through the books they read; it operates as a pedagogical vehicle for what Thapan (2022) identifies as the critical process of ‘unconditioning’. By exposing students to literature from diverse geopolitical contexts, the library enables them to see the world critically. When a student reads a book/story from Iran or any other country and marks it on the map, the map becomes a canvas of shared human experience (interconnectedness). This activity operationalises Krishnamurti’s vision of relationship that the individual does not exist in isolation but is intrinsically related to the whole of humanity. The map acts as a mirror and reveals that emotions (sorrow, joy, fear) are not local but universal, after becoming the canvas of shared experience. In this sense this activity is not merely building literacy, but it is also nurturing the mind essential for peace. It helps students to relate to others with empathy rather than through the distorted lens of conditioned prejudice.

The library promotes regional languages by exposing students to the books written in regional languages. The library has a collection of books in Kannada, Hindi, Sanskrit and other languages.

Art Village: the site for experiential learning

Art Village is one of the most important components of the valley school. It is not like some mainstream school art class; it is so different from that. This art village is situated in the middle of a small forest-like area, just 500-700 meters away from the Junior School. Students carrying

their art kits walk towards it. In the path they encounter nature; the walk is not merely a commute but a pedagogical activity where knowledge is constructed through direct observation and reflection rather than rote memorisation. The paddy field is not just scenery, but the land care class happens here; this transforms the physical landscape into an active learning laboratory which grounds academic concepts related to land in real-world phenomena. The habituation of students and animals to each other's presence fosters a sense of interconnectedness with nature. After walking through natural landscape, students reach the Art Village. This art village consists of several hut-shaped classrooms which have no/fewer walls and an amphitheatre (where theatre and other classes, and also major cultural programs, happen).

There are a variety of activities (painting, woodwork, sculpting, thread work, paper crafts, dance, theatre, vocal music, tabla, mridangam, pottery, and ceramics) in the Art Village. The theatre class serves as a primary tool for socialisation through the body, voice, and imagination. The use of games like 'Simon Says' acts as a tool for social integration and dissolution of traditional boundaries. I observed some students making bowls in a pottery session. The instructor ('Uncle' in TVS parlance) focused entirely on the feeling of the clay. He asked students not to fight the clay but listen to it. It is about entering a dialogic relationship with the material, not about imposing one's will on the material. This activity was not about demanding perfection but about making an effort. Because of it, when a student's attempt to make a structure (bowl, mask, etc.) results in what they envisioned, there is no shame/bad grade. The students simply mashed the clay again and started again. This moment seems small but teaches a massive psychological lesson that failure is a part of the process, not a judgement of the self. This eliminates the fear of failure.

Art Village is a place that is characterised by a distinct experiential learning orientation. Teachers employ open-ended, observation-based activities that encourage students to interact

authentically by drawing pictures from their immediate environment or engaging in projects that foreground personal expression. The educational philosophy favours process over product and ensuring space for unique and student-centric artistic exploration rather than being rigid and outcome-orientated.

J. Krishnamurti started several schools because he deeply believed that real change starts in how people think and live. His vision for education was to bring a transformation in human consciousness. For this, he felt that children need to be raised in environments free from fear, control, or the constant pressure of rewards and punishments. In these kinds of nurturing spaces, especially close to nature, children can truly learn what freedom is. They can grow up without being weighed down by fear or driven blindly by desire and ignorance. Krishnamurti believed that only when children are allowed to learn and discover in such a caring and open setting, they develop the clarity, understanding, and sensitivity needed to live peacefully and responsibly in the world.

Junior and Middle School

Junior School consists of grade one to grade four students. Students of grade 1 are divided into two different groups (Koyals and Bulbuls); each group has approximately twenty-five students. And grades two to four are divided into six different mixed-age groups. It means students of all grades sit together in a class, and a student spends three years in the same mixed-age group.

The pedagogical approach in Junior School is fundamentally orientated towards a nonthreatening and psychologically safe and free environment. In this environment students are encouraged to articulate curiosity, participate in activities without apprehension, and inquire about what they want to know or are interested in. This kind of environment aligns with Krishnamurti's philosophy that actively destabilises hierarchical relationships between students and teachers. Here, in the Valley, emotional security, freedom, and dialogical

engagement get prioritised. As the Valley school is surrounded with nature, students participate in different types of activities related to it. This integration of natural surroundings and outdoor engagement is embedded in Krishnamurti's advocacy for learning as an embodied and relational process, which facilitates holistic development and fosters a strong sense of interconnectedness.

In Middle School, an interdisciplinary pedagogy is being used. The integration of an English song and the timeline of the Blue Nose teach students to analyse events through multiple lenses. The subsequent task of documenting important events of their life is a form of personal socialisation, training students to structure their own identity and narrative. The students become active historians of their own lives rather than passive learners of the history. The science class demonstrates ecological socialisation and analogy. Discussing tree infections and relating them to humans establishes an analogy that teaches the interconnectedness of human and environmental health (ecological sociology). Activities like observing and drawing stilt roots and discussing the impact of landslides turn the natural environment into a direct source of epistemological inquiry.

Mixed-Age Groups: Eliminating Hierarchy

Unlike other mainstream schools where the hierarchy-based classroom system is being followed, here in The Valley School, there are mixed-age classrooms. In these mixed-age classrooms, students of three grades (2nd, 3rd, and 4th) sit together on the floor, and these mixed-age classrooms are not for specific subjects but for all subjects. There are 5-6 low-height tables in the class; at each table 3 students sit together, and these students are of different grades. This mixed-age group divided into 6 different groups; all groups are named after the synonyms of 'earth' (Ila, Bhuv, Prithvi, etc.). This shows the school's intent to connect it to nature. Clearly, it makes students sensitive towards nature. These mixed-age groups are vertical, not

horizontal. Students of each group spend at least 3 years with the same group. Also, these groups are smaller in size (approximately 24 students/group); it helps them to be habituated or comfortable with their classmates, and also it helps in fostering a strong bond among fellow students. The presence of mixed-age groups across various classes creates a structure for collaborative enquiry and conditioning. Older students (senior school students) take on mentor roles (as seen in vertical group meetings, where they assist juniors with crafts), through the mentor role they build solidarity and reinforce their learning through teaching.

These mixed-age groups foster peer learning and allow students to seek and provide academic support without fear; this system particularly benefits those who are still developing certain competencies. While some students are emergent readers, the absence of overt comparison reduces anxiety and the feeling of being ‘behind’ peers, and it supports a more holistic development of the students.

Experiential Learning in Junior School

Circle Time: This is the institutional mechanism for social maintenance and conflict resolution. The school prioritises dialogue and emotional intelligence over punitive discipline, teaching active listening and social negotiation by allowing students to discuss anything that bothers them (including bullying). A salient feature of the valley school is the cultivation of a safe emotional climate. Practices like ‘circle time’ enable students to share their concerns related to school and personal life. This activity ensures the openness and psychological safety of the students.

‘Circle Time’ operationalises Krishnamurti’s idea of dialogue as a mode of enquiry. Unlike mainstream schools, where these kinds of issues are often silenced as distractions from the curriculum, at TVS these issues are discussed freely and as a part of the curriculum. For instance, bullying is not addressed through the binary of victim-perpetrator and subsequent

suspension (exclusion), but through a restorative model. This circle (group) of students collectively explores the roots of fear, insecurity, and aggression by discussing. The role of the teacher in this group is not as a judge delivering the verdict but as a facilitator of active listening and forcing students to delve deep into the issues they raise or topics they discuss. This equips students with the relational sensitivity required to deal with the complex emotional landscapes of life.

Classroom Duties: The assignment of daily duties (sweeping, rolling mats, etc.) to student groups instils an ethic of labour and collective responsibility, enforcing a sense of ownership over the shared space and promoting gender equality in labour. These duties are strategically organised to engineer social cohesion. The school instils a dignity of labour by mandating that students perform maintenance tasks. These classroom duties are a pedagogical intervention that enforces the collective responsibility. They learn to work together in a team through this activity.

The Pedagogy of Unlearning: Deconstructing Hierarchical Knowledge

Constructivist pedagogy is at the core of the school's educational philosophy; in it, knowledge is built through direct experience and reflection. Experiential learning, in a Junior School teacher's terms, happens all the time and in every subject. It is not something that's limited to one class or topic; it is a part of everything that students learn in Junior School. Students engage in hands-on activities, observation, and inquiry and participate in cycles of growth in the natural world and collectively learn mathematics and scientific concepts through real-world phenomena. This experiential learning framework embodies a process of 'unlearning and relearning', which is essential for students who come here in the valley from conventional schools, where knowledge is conceived through memorising the facts and theoretical learning. But, in the valley, knowledge is conceived as dynamic and correlated rather than hierarchical

(for example, maths is better than art). The curriculum is highly activity-based, with emphasis on experiential learning methods. For example, for mathematics, teachers use seeds for regrouping and use hands to measure trees before using standard measures; teachers try to develop understanding of concepts by introducing activities which involve non-standard measures (hand spans for measuring trees). Outdoor walks and direct encounters with nature are included in the environment studies module. This highlights the role of sensory engagement and observation in understanding of concepts and construction of knowledge. These kinds of strategies indicate a progressive education philosophy that gives priority to experiential learning over rote learning.

The physical architecture of the classrooms of the valley is characterised by openness and naturalness. Small cohort size enables teachers to give each student personal attention and encourage teamwork and shared responsibility. Students engage in the construction of a free space for themselves and also decorate their classrooms using their handmade crafts. This engagement develops a sense of collective ownership and ecological respect. Pedagogical activities are flexible and adaptive. Teachers change the approach according to the needs of the students. Predetermined lesson plans evolve in favour of the interests of students and emergent learning needs.

Senior School Classroom: Dissolving Hierarchy and Cultivating Consciousness

The small class size and informal lectures create a safe space for the development of critical consciousness. The teacher's appreciation for creative answers, even if wrong, encourages intellectual risk-taking and agency, which is essential for engaging with critical theory like Karl Marx and challenging established social structures. The use of native language and jokes also affirms cultural identity and social cohesion within the group.

The informal relationship between students and teachers can be witnessed by students addressing their teachers by their names or familial titles (uncle, aunty, etc.). This practice dissolves the hierarchical barriers and fosters mutual respect from intrinsic motivation rather than forced etiquette (Thapan, 2006). The Valley School's learning environment attempts to be free from social and academic conditioning that is often observed in traditional schools. Students have freedom to choose any task of their choice to do, with differentiated activities available for various ability levels. They are encouraged to communicate freely and honestly.

Consequently, a sharp pedagogical friction emerges in the senior classrooms between the ELM and the looming necessity of standardized testing (JEE & NEET). The school's aspirational goal to cultivate a genuine love for learning (Krishnamurti, 1974) is abruptly compromised sometimes by the utilitarian demands of academic survival. Students are accustomed to exploring knowledge organically at their own developmental rhythms. They find themselves thrust into the rigid timelines dictated by JEE and NEET syllabi. This creates an anxious environment for students balancing critical consciousness with urgent exam-oriented preparation. However, the internal institutional division between those enforcing transcendent values (the 'ideologues') and academic demands (the 'pedagogues') has 'vastly changed and become somewhat more complex' (Thapan, 2006). Rather than operating in strict opposition, these orders are now fused; teachers of different ideological persuasions have made a 'common cause' and share practical work and values to guide students through these external academic pressures.

Redefining Success: Self-Reflection over Social Comparison

Assessment avoids traditional exams, and it involves an informal way of continuous assessment. As there are no exams till 8th grade, the mode of assessment is formative, continuous and integrative rather than summative and reductionist. Teachers use observational

strategies in both structured and unstructured contexts to ensure conceptual learning, group participation and the application of hands-on skills. This process is not collective; it is highly individualised so that it allows students to navigate learning trajectories in accordance with their unique strengths and developmental rhythms. In this school students get individual one-on-one feedback; it ensures privacy and helps in minimising the competitiveness or embarrassment among students.

The valley recasts the discipline as a collective endeavour orientated toward harmonious coexistence and the equitable enjoyment of the shared resources and environment. Teachers facilitate reflective discussions on the topic/meaning of freedom and the ethical imperatives of mutual respect rather than enforcing compliance. Then, discipline emerges as a scaffolding mechanism that undergirds communal flourishing, rather than as an externally imposed regimen.

The educational outcomes of the experiential learning methods are crucial for a student's development. ELM enhances comfort and attunement with ecological cycles and the natural world; it also deepens intra-group bonds and affective solidarity. One important outcome is that it helps in transfer and contextualisation of academic knowledge within lived experience. It provides with greater capacity for self-reflection, self-regulation, and social responsibility

The pedagogical approach of the valley school is highly inspired by Krishnamurti's ideas of freedom, fear and education. This approach is student-centred, where educational boundaries are porous, and learning unfolds as a continuous and relational process. In this whole process assessment is seamlessly embedded in the routine of interaction. The dialectic between discipline and freedom is harmonised by sustained dialogue and fostering of responsibilities (Krishnamurti, 1974).

Conclusion

The Valley School stands as an alternative to mainstream education, and the experiential learning method provides the methodological bridge that is necessary to adopt Krishnamurti's philosophy into an actionable pedagogy. While the mainstream Indian education system operates as a tool for reproducing social stratification and creating clerks (Kumar, 1991), The Valley School stands out as a strong counterpart. Observations demonstrate that the school actively deconstructs the traditional vertical hierarchy between teacher and student; by replacing the authority with dialogue and competition with collaboration, the school successfully fosters solidarity that is largely absent in mainstream schooling.

However, the analysis also uncovers a critical paradox within the school. While the isolation from the noise of the city provides the school with an environment which allows the cultivation of a fear-free mind, it simultaneously creates a stark dissonance for those students who are standing on the precipice of the external world (students of grades 11 & 12). The anxiety expressed by these students regarding getting admission to the mainstream colleges that are competitive in nature highlights the friction between the school's transcendent ideology and the material reality of the society. Yet, I argue that this tension doesn't represent a failure of Krishnamurti's philosophy but its ultimate test. Internally, the school manages this tension through a merger of its transcendental and local orders, with teachers and students collaboratively negotiating these contradictions in their everyday academic and social lives. The experiential learning method provides the students the inner fortress necessary to navigate it on their own terms by nurturing self-awareness and also fostering intellectual freedom. Therefore, the 'inner fortress' cultivated by the school can paradoxically function as a space of emotional confinement for a struggling 11th or 12th grade student. If this fortress is built entirely on the principles of non-competition and affective solidarity, it provides insufficient practical scaffolding for a student suddenly forced into higher education that is full of

competition. The school succeeds beautifully in internal, fear-free socialization, but structurally leaves students vulnerable to the external realities of the Indian higher education system.

The experiential learning method is not just a pedagogical technique for academic retention but a well-structured intervention for human liberation. It is the vital methodological bridge that translates Krishnamurti's vision into a reality. Unlike mainstream schools, The Valley School offers a radical proposition that true intelligence is not the ability to compete in stratified society but the freedom to live without conflict within it by replacing the fear with the motivation of curiosity. The Valley School stands as a testament to the possibility of an educational system that prioritises the human spirit.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, for awarding me the Shiv Lal Sawhney Scholarship, 2025. I am thankful to Prof. Anuja Agarwal, Head of Department, and Prof. Meenakshi Thapan, Director, Rishi Valley School for her support and encouragement. I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Charu Sawhney. Her mentorship, insightful feedbacks, and constant encouragement helped me to navigate with the complexities of fieldwork.

I am truly grateful to Mr. Jayaram, Director of The Valley School, for welcoming me into the campus and granting me the opportunity to conduct this research. My sincere thanks to the Coordinator, Ms. Elsie Varghese, for her kind assistance and help in coordinating my time at the valley.

I am immensely thankful to the teaching staff Pratik Bhamare, Aman Verma, Asra Nair, Janani P, Ashima Dey, and Ananda and others for their support willingness to share the information that was crucial for my research. My gratitude also extends to the Librarian, Sowmya Ravindranath, whose enriching discussions provided invaluable insights for this research. I am deeply grateful to Mohammad Azaruddin for his constant support, which greatly eased the practical challenges of my daily fieldwork.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to the students of The Valley School. Their curiosity, willingness to engage in informal conversations gave this research its depth.

References

- Anand, V. (2020). J. Krishnamurti's philosophy of education. *International Journal of Research in all Subjects in Multi Languages (IJRSML)*, 8(8).
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, codes and control: Vol. 3. Towards a theory of educational transmissions*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). Sage Publications.
- Dore, B. (2014). Living in the bubble: Rishi Valley School and the sense of community. In M. Thapan (Ed.), *Ethnographies of schooling in contemporary India* (pp. 271–332). SAGE Publications India.

- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Kong, Y. (2021). The role of experiential learning on students' motivation and classroom engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 771272. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.771272>
- Krishnamurti, J. (1974). *On education*. Orient Longman.
- Kumar, K. (1991). *Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. SAGE Publications.
- Lahon, S. (2016). The role of holistic education on students' optimum possible development. *Social Science Journal of Gargaon College*, 4.
- Malik, P., & Behera, S. (2024). The transformative power of experiential learning: Bridging theory and practice. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(2).
- Thapan, M. (2006). *Life at school: An ethnographic study* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Thapan, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Ethnographies of schooling in contemporary India*. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Thapan, M. (2022). *J. Krishnamurti: Educator for peace*. Routledge India.
- Uyen, B. P., Tong, D. H., & Lien, N. B. (2022). The effectiveness of experiential learning in teaching arithmetic and geometry in sixth grade. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 858631. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.858631>
- Vedaparayana, G. (2002). Krishnamurti's philosophy of education. *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 29(4).