



# Within, Without

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When Tagore was asked why he started a school, he responded by saying that he had such miserable memories of his own brief encounters with schooling where he was confined to a room with rows of benches, bare walls and high windows, that he longed to give children an experience of freedom and nature<sup>i</sup>. Schools are often restricted spaces both physically and mentally with little to stimulate the imagination or challenge the body to movement. The world of home and the village are usually in sharp contrast to the often enclosed, crowded and unfriendly space of the classroom.

A school accommodates many overlapping layers of visible and less tangible elements: the structure of the building itself and the physical surroundings, children and the teachers each with their own particular experience and sensitivity, the language, history and expectations of the immediate neighbourhood of home and community and beyond to the wider world of possibilities and constraints.

Like the human body a school has both fragility and resilience. It depends on many interconnecting systems with only a thin layer of skin to separate the inner from the outer. Primo Levi, the Italian author, writes of “the ecosystem

that lodges unsuspected in my depths, saprophytes (‘living organisms that feed on dead organic matter’), and birds of day and night, creepers, butterflies, crickets and fungi”<sup>ii</sup>. Tagore did not use the language of ecology, but he did intuit that the process of education was an individual’s growing sense of unity with the natural world and of the whole of humankind.

Forty years ago when I first came to Silvepura -a village on the outskirts of Bengaluru – the majority of children did not go to school. The children of the mason, the carpenters and the workers who built our home were keen to attend school. I wondered if school for these children would inevitably mean being restricted to closed and noisy spaces. This seemed such a contrast to the children’s freedom to move freely in and out of their homes and to some extent within and beyond the village.

It was for this reason that the school was designed so that there was an easy movement between inside and outside spaces and both areas were understood as potential learning areas.

Inevitably the landscape of a school and its buildings express a relationship between the children and the world. It might be the alien and

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<sup>i</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, ‘My School’ in *Personality* pp.119-120. 2002 Edition. New Delhi: Rupa.

<sup>ii</sup>Primo Levi, (1981) *The Search for Roots*. p.5. Translated by Peter Forbes (2001), Penguin Books.



hostile environment of Tagore's memories, but it can also be an inviting space that offers possibilities to play and work in. We can deliberately create spaces that do not sharply separate the inside from the outside by integrating verandahs, courtyards, low walls, 'jali' work and working spaces outside. Creepers can be cultivated to cover walls and even to create a shady area for play or work. Things can be made accessible, whether, books or games, and children can contribute to creating areas of interest and beauty. Bare walls can be transformed, not by adorning them with fixed, unchanging print, but by making them into dynamic, flexible spaces where children's own recent writing and pictures can be displayed.

In a rapidly changing society can we identify what are the elements that create a healthy environment for children to grow and learn in? Old school buildings are being replaced by new ones often using expensive and more durable materials but they are not necessarily more aesthetically appealing or conducive to well-being. There is a challenge to evolve designs that use materials, including new ones, which are economical and practical yet still respond to the needs of growing children.

Schools in a rural setting have the luxury of trees, rocks and open spaces, even though these are

sometimes not valued. Recent research has shown that children do not respond so readily to artificial, static playgrounds, however well-equipped, but often prefer flexible, private and wild spaces beyond an adult's view and control that they can shape, change and feel responsible for<sup>iii</sup>. Ironically it is often economically privileged children who lead the more narrow and restricted lives because both their home and school areas are tightly controlled environments.

Children need to be in a place where they have the space to find their own connections and not have their world disembodied and compartmentalised. Loris Malaguzzi sums up the effects of an institutionalised prescriptive setting process.

**They tell the child:**  
that work and play  
reality and fantasy  
science and imagination  
sky and earth  
reason and dream  
are things  
that do not belong together.<sup>iv</sup>

The school environment is a whole world where learning needs to be grounded in the physical, sensory reality that children can relate to reflectively, practically and imaginatively.

Children can be encouraged to actively engage in caring and connecting with the surrounding environment in multiple ways through work, play and study. For example, each morning the children in the school where I work make a mandala in the middle of the main room from things they have found in the garden or sometimes from home. The designs of grasses, seeds, seedpods, flowers and leaves are never

<sup>iii</sup> Johnson, L.M. (1988) 'The Brook Knolls Cooperative Community: A case study for resident design of public open space', in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 17, 283-295. See also article by the same author (Johnson), *American Playgrounds and Schoolyards – A Time for Change*.

<sup>iv</sup> Loris Malaguzzi, *Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*, L. Gandini (ed.). 1998 edition, Elsevier Science

the same but reflect the season, selection and ingenuity of the children who make it. In addition to helping children observe changes in the natural world, this activity lends itself to the explorations of pattern, symmetry, shape, texture and colour.

The garden becomes a rich resource for learning as children not only play but work to maintain, the land. For example, Children can compare and contrast the advantages of raised seedbeds with other methods of planting or learn about what is biodegradable by sorting and composting organic waste. The children can observe and record changes in the growth and decay in nature around them – the appearance of fungi following a sudden downpour of rain, the arrival of a hitherto unseen species of snail or the

surprising amount of time the threads of an enormous web can survive - all make the outside space a rich resource for learning.

School needs also to be linked to the lives of the children beyond the school. Children bring to school not

just their bodies but so many impressions, thoughts and experiences gleaned from outside. One way to include children's own selection of news is to give time for diary keeping. Children can draw pictures, write or dictate significant events. These happenings might seem trivial to an adult, but a quarrel at home, the purchase of new clothes, the birth of puppies, a broken promise, a visit to the doctor or a journey by bus may all be worthy of being recorded in the child's mind. Language needs to be used from the beginning to share, express and extend experience.

The immediate environment of the village and home is a rich 'text' for children's learning. Teaching can begin with using what is familiar to children to open up the world of geography, history, economics and science. For example, in the history class children were asked to select an

object of interest from home. Objects chosen included a door frame, a gun, a sewing machine and a smokeless 'chula'. The children discussed these things and together drew up a list of questions to ask about things they really wanted to know. There were surprising questions like, "Can you shoot ghosts with a gun?" along with more conventional enquiries about the age, material and use of the objects! This activity provided data for children to draw up a timeline that gave them a sense of the past and how things changed because of newly discovered materials and new forms of technology.

Children can begin by looking at the details of their particular everyday lives: the materials the house is made from, the clothes they wear, the remedies that are taken and the food they eat. It

soon becomes clear to the children themselves that there are many forces from outside that affect choices and possibilities.

Social studies demand that we do not romanticise the past or sanitise the present but try to engage with the

uncertainties and challenges of the present. The style and pace of living has changed dramatically in the surrounding communities in the last ten years. Patterns of family life, styles of child care, occupations of both men and women, eating habits, ways of resolving conflict and sources of entertainment are all in a state of transition as the community struggles to adapt to galloping urbanisation. The neighbourhood is being transformed from an agricultural based economy into a semi-urban setting with all the advantages and problems that such transformation brings.

These changes raise questions for us all and children are very aware of how these upheavals impact their lives. The growing problem of disposal of waste, the acute shortage of water or the rising power of local police are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed both through



discussion and through thinking about and imagining alternatives.

Children can begin to think about the future of the village and their part in it by studying the dramatic changes in the landscape -how fields of crops have been displaced to make way for housing plots or how water tanks have disappeared and have been replaced by brick kilns or how open wells have become defunct gaping holes .

As mentioned earlier, there are many visible and hidden, obvious and more subtle layers that make up a school's environment. The physical environment of the school and its surroundings is one dimension of the place of the school. There is another less 'namable' or identifiable dimension which is the ethos of the school. The ethos of a school is palpable in the way relationships and roles are played out, attitudes towards learning are evident, and a sense of responsibility and caring towards each other and the things and materials of the school is practiced. Does the ethos of the school reflect pressure, control and boredom or is it a space that suggests openness and freedom to explore new ideas?

Part of the ethos or character of a school is reflected in the way that words are used: who says them and to whom and why are they being voiced at all. Do the children connect to the words they hear, read and use?

Children need time and space to express their ideas whether in words or images. Pressure to produce hasty answers might mean mere repetition or imitation of someone else's formulations without internalising them.

The British novelist, Philip Pullman compares the creative process to fishing at night on an open sea where time, silence, risk taking and patience are needed and even then the results are unpredictable. He bewails the prescriptive methods that teachers use to get children to conform to different genres and techniques that concentrate on style. The products are

measured against a check list of standard requirements and then produced as evidence of effective teaching.

A young child learns to use language by participating in conversations through listening and eavesdropping and then slowly discovering how to voice and share her own stories. Similarly in exploring visual language the child builds on interaction with things. Art is not primarily about making products but more about learning to look, hear, smell and touch. It begins with being in a receptive relationship with things, people and materials.

As Pullman remarks, we all need, on occasions, uninterrupted time and space. We cannot assume, for example, that children all need the same amount of time to complete a picture, a math sum or a construction. Young children can surprise us by their capacity for sustained concentration.

One of the things that we probably don't give children enough of is a sense of autonomy. Place, time and content are largely managed by the teacher who determines who should be doing what and for how long. Three years ago we began a small experiment to allow at least some choice for children. Once a week on a Friday all the children choose some activity that they want to do during 'free choice.' Activities include such things as drama, cooking, paper folding, painting, pattern making, computer art, block building and clay work. The children can work alone, in pairs or in groups and choose across age groups who they work with. There is minimal intervention by teachers but at the end of the period the children present to each other what they have done.

This kind of freedom may not be practical, possible or desirable all the time and there is clearly a need for explicit instruction and mediation of new knowledge in certain areas. But a school can try to work with different children's energy, preferred styles of learning and interests and not against them.



In thinking about the school environment we can consider many layers. A healthy environment is one where there are connections - connections between the inside of the building and the outside spaces, the learning within the school and the life beyond its boundaries, the space to connect to what is going on inside you and to think, dream and imagine and the place and time to share that and the possibility to choose what to do and how. Tagore's dream of creating a shared learning

space where the inner workings of the mind and the world of nature around can shape and enrich each other in freedom is an inspiration to meet the changing needs of here and now in order to prepare for a more balanced future.



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