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Lifelong Learning

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,
through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful
inquiry [people] pursue in the world,
with the world, and with each other
(Freire 1972: 46).

1. The School Welcome

The visitor arrived in the School¹ from far away with her load of theories and practices about learning, schooling, language learning and teaching. The journey had been long in time and space and culture. Expectations were high. Reality far exceeded them. The visitor, an experienced teacher and educator, soon realised that she was there to learn. While being treated with the respect due to her age and experience, the visiting teacher became a learner of life skills.

When the visitor arrived, in February 2024, Rajasthan (Northern India) was immersed in a mild winter with bright blue skies and pleasant temperatures. Trees and plants were blossoming everywhere enjoying the respite offered by the season before the scorching and unbearable heat the summer months would bring before the monsoons would set in. The School is in the countryside, just at the outskirts of the city. In the distance, the Aravalli ridge surrounds the plain. The Aravallis are geologically ancient mountains formed well before the Himalayas existed. Seen from Ajmer, they are a wooded rim in the distance, protecting the city, its lakes and the School. At the time the visitor arrived at the School, the countryside around it and the Aravallis in the distance were deep green, covered with the bounty of vegetation. Impossible to imagine that the countryside nearby can easily become a desert if not tended and cared for.

The visitor had seen the School eighteen years earlier: the changes made by the School organisers had transformed the place into an attractive campus. The School founders had wanted the School to be located in the countryside where they had planted, tended, watered, cherished gardens and orchards which surrounded the School buildings with the view on the Aravallis. The School was in a space of ancient and ever-regenerating beauty. Founded in 1996, it has always improved over the years: buildings for dorms and for meals for children and teachers were constructed, and so was the water harvesting reservoir, residences for the

¹ The School, located near Ajmer (Rajasthan, India), is called 'Bal Prakash' ('radiant children') and it is an Indian ONG (<https://www.balprakash.in/>). I am deeply grateful to the founders and organisers for the time I was invited to spend at Bal Prakash: Kusum Paliwal, visionary President of the Board of Trustees and Head of the School, and Sheela Upadhyay, generous Secretary of the Trust and longtime friend. Many thanks to the teachers and children who welcomed me.

teachers, the library decorated by the children, the computer room, the stable for the few cows. Around these buildings, the sandy, dusty soil has been lovingly taken care of: fruit trees and garden plants planted and tended, a playground built near the school, a vegetable garden nearby, artistic benches created by an artist, Tutul Anindita Bhattacharya, for the School, a pond with lotuses and water lilies, a home-made pool for the children to jump into the water when summer temperature soars, a nursery for young plants, a vermicompost lot. The School has to be comfortable, welcoming, peaceful and beautiful. Among the basic needs, along with a safe place to sleep, eat healthy food, find books and education, the School has included from the very start the beauty of the surroundings, the healing power of plants and greenery, blossoming flowers and birds feeding on the fruit trees. Bougainvillea are flashes of colours here and there like beacon fires. The place embodies what Freire calls 'life-affirming humanization' (Freire 1972: 43).

The School, virtually open to the countryside, has special wardens who do not allow strangers on the grounds: stray dogs have formed a pack headed by an experienced and wise female dog, her coat golden, like a queen. The dogs feel the School is home and behave accordingly: they are fed by the teachers and the children, and the children play with them. The dogs keep watch in exchange. The visitor was not perceived as enemy by the dogs; if anything, they wanted her to play with them. They felt the favourable attitude of the other humans towards the visitor, and accepted the stranger as a welcome guest even though she was not playful enough for the young dogs, used to the children's energetic running around.

In India education is compulsory from 6 to 14 years of age and state schools are open and free to all children until the compulsory school-leaving certificate is attained. And so, who is this School for? The School is there for those children who would not attend school otherwise: to go to school every day children need to have a family or a carer who takes them there; in some situations the adults are in no position to do it or the state school is too far away from the village home; in other cases children are in charge of younger siblings and they have to stay home. The School welcomes these boys and girls, from 3 to 18 (so beneath and beyond compulsory school age), and offers them boarding and lessons for free. The founders and organisers want the School to be a safe haven for difficult lives and a beautiful welcoming place to forget sorrows, heal wounds, restore smiles and learn to be self-reliant, become self-confident, help others, experience respect and self-respect. The members of the board of Trustees are volunteers and self-funded; the local (and distant) community has formed a network to help the School in practical ways endorsing its principles and values, and pay teachers and maintenance.

In the 28 years of its life (from 1996 to 2024, the time of writing), the School has seen many generations of children arrive, thrive, play, learn, grow up and then go and live their own life. Not all remain in the School as long as they should or could. Some families or carers move far away and take the children with them, others marry the girls off at a young age, some adolescents are reclaimed back home to look after newborns or younger siblings, others have to go to work. The School organisers try to persuade families to leave the children as long as possible in a learning environment, but the last word is not for the School to be pronounced.



Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Freire 1972: 46).

2. Skills for Life

The children (so they appeared to the visitor even though some were adolescents) were playing in the playground when the visitor arrived on Sunday and the late afternoon sun added a golden glow to the countryside. The playground was full of laughter, races, chatting and playing. The following days, it was the weekly routine that struck the visitor, the supportive atmosphere that existed in the School, the autonomy of the children, their ability to rely on one another, and their skills to interact with a complete stranger who did not speak any of the languages currently spoken in the School (Hindi and Rajasthani among others).

The visitor saw that the routine was quietly steered by the teachers and autonomously carried out by the children who were given responsibility to contribute to the School day and its smooth progress from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night: helping with meals and cleaning up, ringing the School bell, participating in classes, working on their own, in groups or pairs, practising crafts, etc. The teachers were quietly supervising, suggesting, helping, supporting. Voices were calm, classes took place with no fuss. Elder

children took care of younger ones, some young ones helped smaller kids as young as 3, 4 or 5 years of age.

Everybody seemed to know well where he or she was supposed to be, at what time, who they should be helping, who should help them, or, in one case, just observe the others learn, unable to do more than that while his classmates included him, smiling, accepting in the activity a boy who was not really contributing to it. He was content to be present, part of the community with his silent, admired observation of his classmates.

The teachers were patient, calm, smiling, firm. They were supported by children who already had the ability to help their classmates. Lessons took place in class groups, smaller groups, pairs, individually. Class groups (young, intermediate and advanced) meant for the teachers working with children of different ages together. Heterogeneous abilities were included in each group: learning and teaching were adapted to the individual student as part of the learning community who would support him/her, starting from his/her ability, competences, knowledge, emotional skills. The visitor realised that up till then she had never seen before such an activation of inclusive practices on the part of the teachers but also on the part of the students who seemed to absorb the teachers' openness and flexibility in this variety of ages, learning experiences, competences, knowledge, motivation. The students behaved as if they knew the teaching principles they were abiding to: respect for diversity, inclusion, peer-learning, autonomy, care and respect for less autonomous children.

The visitor was immediately included in this environment and taken care of. The children, in particular two adolescent students, F. and G., took charge of the visiting teacher. Their communicative abilities were remarkable. English as an Additional Language was the bridge, a bit uncertain, but supported by a great desire to make themselves understood by the guest. Motivation was the magic wand for all children: they wanted to communicate with the visitor, they were curious of her different background. She was a sort of a portal to a faraway world they had never seen, but they imagined attractive in diversity.

The children were rightly proud of their School, everything in it: their classrooms, the beautiful library they had decorated themselves with the help of an artist, the grounds full of flowers and plants, even the playful dogs. The visitor was shown round, helped to understand where to go for classes, accompanied to places, often surrounded by children who looked at her and wanted attention, eye contact, the reaction of a smile: Was the visitor paying attention? Did she manage to see the School through their eyes? Their eyes asked silently: "Isn't this the most beautiful School you've seen, Madam?"

The role had reversed, like the cartwheels performed by one girl, not to show off, but because her friends wanted to demonstrate to the visitor how good she is in gymnastics, how remarkable and special. Proud of her. And while the visitor was wondering what was the best course to reach out to them, they did. The teacher did not have to explain, elicit answers or ask questions, but she was included, surrounded by eager children who wanted to ask her questions and talk. Communicative magic was collectively performed by the children. Later, the visitor called it 'the language pooling strategy'. Only some of the children could speak some English (EAL), some had snippets of it, some were too small to have experienced it yet. They did not give up. They looked at one another, decided what question to ask the visitor and they put the utterance together, contributing collectively with



what they knew; then one of them (usually an older student) would be the spokesperson for the group, more or less confident of their English skills, but definitely proud of what they had collectively come up with. It was crowdsourcing language interaction on the spot, off the cuff. The visitor was amazed. The strategy worked also for checking that everybody got what the visitor said: some children would translate into languages unknown to the visitor, check meaning, back and fro among themselves. They did not want to miss the opportunity to understand or be understood.

Communicative strategies were deployed verbally and multimodally: gestures, facial expressions, gaze, movement were making meaning together with English and sometimes without. Determination in getting the meaning across is usually successful. As are motivation, involvement, relevance of the interaction for the participants. Yes, they all wanted to interact successfully and they all tried their best, accepting uncertainties and vagueness, relying on their friends. The visitor was asked what countries she had visited, what games she likes playing, whether she can jump. Jump? The visitor thought it better, lest she should risk giving a demonstration, and admitted that no, she is not able to jump.

And so the children as a group took the lead. They wanted their friend to demonstrate how easily and effortlessly she could do cartwheels and the crab. She was shy at first, but everybody encouraged her, she complied and everybody applauded.

And the countries visited by the teacher, did they include Norway? No, the visitor said, never been to Norway. The children explained that they had had a young teacher from Norway last year and groups of visitors from a Norwegian school in the past. The visitor admitted that they certainly knew more about Norway than herself.

The visitor was asked what languages she can speak. When the children heard that Italian is her native language, they wanted to learn Italian. The strange unfamiliar sounds of that language did not seem to be a problem for them: they easily picked up expressions, repeating them smoothly, perfect sounding. Yes, the visitor thought to herself, it is the miracle of bilingual, trilingual children who juggle between languages and language varieties, who often arrive in school speaking languages different from the obligatory medium of instruction (Hindi) and learn to speak, understand, read and write in a language different from their own. Many of them belong to the third of the world children who have to bridge that gap between their own language(s) and the language of education, experiencing an arduous school start (Romaine 2013). However, having to use different languages makes them fast at picking up expressions in an exotic language like Italian. Complex sounds do not discourage them. 'Buongiorno', 'Arrivederci', they repeat in their young voices, like those of Italian kids their age, perfectly pronounced. They know the visitor is surprised at their skill and smile broadly enjoying the moment.

Reading time in the afternoon is free for everybody who wants to join in; otherwise, they can do other activities: studying, playing, sewing, drawing, gardening, etc. The children get the key and open the door of the library building, welcome the visitor in, put mats on the floor; then each child chooses a book to read. Free reading time, independent time to enjoy having a book in your hands, opening it, looking at the images, reading or not reading the written text, putting it back, taking another, reading the same book together with another child. They can go back to class for afternoon activities when they want, taking responsibility for how they use some of their time. A teacher is present, proud of the children's autonomy during library reading time. The Head of the School wanted this free time with books for children who do not have any at home and in some cases cannot read and write before coming to the School.

One of the children, attentive, caring, witty, realised that the visitor had not chosen a book for herself and she thought that she may need help selecting one. The girl took from the shelves a beautifully illustrated book about the animals of the world and put it on the teacher's desk. The volume was in English and probably one of the most precious possessions of the library.

They notice things these children, they know how to make people feel welcome, included. They know when people need help and what they might like. Maybe because this is what is done by the teachers in the School to make them feel at home and cherished. In the School you receive support from the community and then you give help back, when you can: most relevant among life-skills. On its website², the School states its educational principles:

It aims for holistic development where children not only reach their academic goals but also develop professional and inter-personal skills. Children take part in farming

² Bal Prakash, <https://www.balprakash.in/> (consulted on 30/05/2024).

and plantation activities on a routine basis. They are also trained for other skills like carpentry, stitching, cooking, music and sports.

Learning for life. Life that will soon be outside the School.

Life and its vitality in nature and society is based on cycles of renewal and regeneration of mutuality, respect and human solidarity. The relationship between soil and society is a relationship based on reciprocity, on the Law of Return, of giving back (Shiva 2015: 5).

3. School in Nature

The founders of the School wanted it to become an oasis of beauty and freshness in a desert climate. The School was planned and built in the countryside to be surrounded by what would become in time orchards, gardens, vegetable garden, a pond for lotuses and water lilies; these can be seen from all the windows and doors of the School. They give the children the opportunity to re-balance their complicated and disrupted lives when they play in the garden and take care of it when this is needed, watering the plants with water harvested in the tank, taking care of the orchard and gathering fruit when ripe. Wilson calls "biophilia" (1984) the human need to seek a connection with natural surroundings thus enacting love for life. This is one of the tenets of the School clearly set on their homepage:

Connect with Nature

There is a special emphasis to be connected with nature. With its sprawling campus and vegetation house. Children stay connected with the mother earth and green ecosystem.

The children learn to take care of living beings: plants and animals, their mates, the teachers, guests, the visitor. Their life outside the School will not be easy, and their ability to see themselves as part of an ecocultural community will help them find their own place in society and be self-confident and resilient.

The teachers and educators in the School teach the children how to become active agents of change and preserve the fresh greenery of garden and orchard in the searing heat of summer. The desertic area where the School is built, originally covered with sparse bushes, is now garden, orchard, vegetable garden, pond, vermicompost plot; life thrives in its exaggerated, imaginative ways.

Ecoliteracy³ is lived everyday in the School by teachers and children. Riane Eisler would approve: "Since partnership education offers a systemic approach, environmental education is not an add-on but an integral part of the curriculum" (Eisler 2000: xvii).

Children are clearly proud of their surroundings and show the visitor around. They

³ "[W]e posit emotional, social, and ecological intelligence as essential dimensions of our universal human intelligence that simply expand outward in their focus: from self, to others, to all living systems" (Goleman, Bennett & Barlow 2012: 26).



know they contribute creating and preserving all that. The result is bountiful, rimmed by the green Aravallis in the distance, like an embrace while the breeze plays the wind-chime.

L'opera d'arte, infatti, a torto o a ragione, infonde in noi una sensazione di pienezza, di compimento di perfezione, esattamente ciò che vogliamo dalla nostra vita⁴
(Todorov 2010: 13).

4. Beauty for Life

The visitor feels she is in a School that instantiates what Eisler calls the partnership model of education:

I call this approach partnership education. It is an education to help children not only better navigate through our difficult times but also create a future orienting more to what in my study of cultural evolution I have identified as a partnership rather than a dominator model. [...] '[T]hey describe systems of belief and social structure that either nurture and support – or inhibit and undermine – equitable, democratic, nonviolent, caring relations' (Eisler 2000: xiv).

⁴ Indeed, the work of art, rightly or wrongly, infuses in us a feeling of fullness, completeness, perfection: precisely what we want from our life (my translation).



Care is material, emotional and mental (Eisler 2000: 8) and the School is a community of learning for living well and in harmony with oneself, the society and the ecosystems. Arts and crafts have the power of giving agency to the children by involving them in the beauty of creating or contributing collectively to making beautiful objects for communal use.

Their library building and the mentors' residence have become walls of flowers imagined and decorated by the children under the supervision of Tutul Anindita Bhattacharya, the artist who donated her time, knowledge and care to inspire the children and involve them into re-inventing blank whitewashed external walls into a meadow in full blossom where every child had the freedom to imagine her/his flower for everybody to see. The library and the mentors' residence are now unique buildings which the children have contributed to rendering special, original, colourful. Their diverse imagination and skills make these buildings precious to them, to other future students, to their teachers, to guests. 'Who painted these building?' asks the visitor. 'We did!', reply the children, and each one of them shows the flower they painted to make the wall blossom. These blossoms created by the imagination and the hands of the children blend with the plants of the garden in a continuity of beauty.

Here and there, tiled benches wait for children and teachers to sit in the shade to chat, play, learn, discuss. The benches are unique, designed by the artist together with the children for the School. Painted paper models became ceramic tiles to cover concrete benches and creating colourful imaginary worlds as welcoming points for sitting, chatting and working.

Woodwork, carpentry, sewing, gardening and other crafts help the children explore a world of skills, beauty and also potential jobs for when they will leave the School.

Beyond the practical side of it, the visitor sees how the children partake in the beautiful surroundings which they also contribute to maintaining and improving. Children's life deserves imagination and involvement.

5. Resilience for Life

Not everything is smooth and straightforward in the School. A community is never without problems. Children arrive at the School with complicated or even sorrowful, traumatic experiences in their mind and body. Sometimes there is no family to go back to, sometimes the family is there but the children do not want to go back to it during the holidays. Some went through experiences of child labour, exploitation, abuse. Words are not enough for the variety of psychological and physical scars. Yet, the visitor finds a calm, relaxing and vibrant atmosphere. No shouting, no scolding. The teachers and educators are gentle, patient, smiling. They keep a watchful eye on the children: it is easy for everybody to repeat negative behaviours they have seen or experienced themselves; it is easy to re-enact the 'victim vs bully' scenario. The teachers entrust the younger children to their older peers, but observe and check that no-one is exploited or ill-treated.

Obsolete habits at times take over and girls cannot complete their school years because the family reclaims them. The organisers and teachers know that they will be married off at a young age, they try to persuade the family to leave the children in the School at least till school-leaving age; but the family has the last word in the matter, and the child leaves not to come back again.

The visitor also knows that some children had to be dismissed because they were misbehaving, and this was affecting other children. The organisers and educators perceive this dismissal as a defeat of the educational system and a loss for the whole School.

Other stories are successful. Students who arrive as adolescents in the School find it difficult to adapt to its routine, but after a few weeks they become part of the community and want to stay on. Children and adolescents are accepted with whatever level of schooling (or lack of it) and they learn to live in the School, respect its rules and routines, the teachers and the other children. They find their own self-respect, inner resilience and strength. Some are fast learners and able to help others in a powerful peer-learning peer-teaching virtuous circle whereby the mentor child learns life skills together with her/his tutees. Caring mentoring and learning become emotional ties of friendship and mutual support to improve and do well together.

In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from 'another world' [...] do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world (Freire 1972: 147).

6. Homecoming

The visitor's time in the School is over. It is time for her to go home. She says goodbye to the teachers, the children, the head. 'Arrivederci' say the children. How can they remember that difficult word so easily? The visitor is touched. A drop of Italian in the land of the Aravallis,



cherished by smiling eyes and mouths. Quick young minds eager to live, to learn, to travel with the visitor if only through words transformed into keepsakes. Words as talismans for change, knowledge to explore the world. If she wants to go home, the visitor thinks, maybe she should remain.

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