

# **A School That Values Connectedness: An Educational Project in the Midst of a Beautiful Natural Environment**

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*“Many people are highly aware of other people’s happiness and try to share in it. On the other hand, many human beings pay no attention to others’ misery.”<sup>1</sup>*

When thinking about Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), it is probably important to understand how sharing contributes to consciousness of the connectedness between oneself and others, as expressed in the quote above.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the educational practices of Rishi Valley Education Centre, which is located in the suburbs of India’s Andhra Pradesh State about 140 kilometers northeast of the city of Bangalore in the state of Karnataka. The institution promotes connectedness between students and teachers through discussion and interaction, and fosters connectedness with nature by enabling students and teachers to experience the blessings of the natural environment.

## **The Natural Environment of Rishi Valley Education Centre**

The Rishi Valley Education Centre was established in 1926 in Andhra Pradesh State in southern India in order to give concrete form to the educational ideas of the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). Educational institutions established by Krishnamurti exist both within and outside India.<sup>2</sup> Among these institutions, Rishi Valley Education Centre was the first to be established. The spacious 250-acre campus includes the Rishi Valley School, the boarding school that all of the approximately 350 students in grades 4-12 (ages 8-17) attend; the Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre, which provides free educational opportunities for residents of nearby rural villages; a Rural Health Centre that plays the role of a hospital and includes facilities for tuberculosis treatment and for eye care; and a Krishnamurti Study Centre which houses books about Krishnamurti and which visitors can use as a library.

At present, the Rishi Valley Education Centre’s campus is surrounded by nature. However, in the past a wasteland had spread across the surrounding areas as a result of environmental destruction. Due to continued environmental preservation activities such as tree-planting, it is said that the natural environment has been returned to its appropriate original state. Now, the campus has such things as an organic garden, an herb garden, and an orchard. In July 1991 the International Council of Bird Preservation (now called BirdLife International) designated the area as a bird preserve as well. Based in this abundant natural environment, environmental education lessons at the Rishi Valley School are able to include teachers and children walking together around a campus inhabited by about 200 species of every variety of bird, and learning through the opportunity to touch nature directly through activities such as bird watching and hiking.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Mr. Vijendra Ramola, teacher of yoga and Hindi at Rishi Valley School (December 6, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Within India are The Valley School in Bangalore, The School in Chennai, and Rajghat Besant School in Benares. Outside of India are Oak Grove School in the U.S. (<http://www.oakgroveschool.com>) and Brockwood Park School in England (<http://www.brockwood.org.uk>).

Mr. V. Santharam, who is in charge of environmental education for 9<sup>th</sup>-12 grade students, says concerning the school environment:

*For students at the Rishi Valley School, the amount of pressure related to studying and taking tests is probably equal to that of students at other schools. However, Rishi Valley School differs from schools in urban areas because there is the silence that comes from being surrounded by the majesty of nature. For children at Rishi Valley School, many of whom come from urban areas, the experience of placing themselves in the midst of this natural environment is significant.<sup>3</sup>*

Santharam says that it is not unusual for graduates who miss this silence to pay visits to the school.

The Rishi Valley School uses this glorious natural environment as a base to demonstrate the educational significance of emphasizing the connectedness between people developed through discussion and interaction.

### **Rich Human Relationships Developed Through Communal Life**

The children who study at the Rishi Valley School come from across India. In the admissions process, elements such as character and talent are considered in addition to academic ability, and it is said that only 12% of applicants are accepted.<sup>4</sup> All of the students at Rishi Valley School are boarding students, and the campus has a total of 21 dorms housing between 12 and 22 students. The teachers and staff of Rishi Valley School also live on campus, with some serving as “house parents” living together with students in the dorms. Rishi Valley School is not only a place where students learn specific subjects through their school lessons. It is a community which emphasizes holistic learning, including cooperation and development of an independent spirit, through communal life on campus.

Before breakfast, students at Rishi Valley School study independently in the library or their rooms, or go out on the playground to participate in sports like volleyball, tennis, basketball or soccer, yoga, or other activities. During weekdays, junior students in the 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades follow this with breakfast in the dining hall at 7:00, and senior students in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades have breakfast at 8:00. During their meals, children can sit where they wish, and staff mix in with students and eat their meals together. The ingredients for the meals at Rishi Valley School are fresh, safe vegetables and fruits grown organically on the campus.

After breakfast, students and teachers meet in a hall for “morning assembly.” When students enter the hall, the four songs selected for that day are written on the blackboard, and each student picks up a songbook. Seats in the hall are not assigned. Students wait with their books open to the page on which the first song is written. With the signal to start, the entire group becomes silent. Then, following several seconds of silence, students begin to sing. Everyone concentrates and the singing voices echo through the hall. When the group singing is finished, the children move to their various classes for their lessons.

At Rishi Valley School, the classes have one teacher and only about twenty students. The following four educational principles serve as a foundation:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) To enable children to explore the natural world and the world of feeling
- 2) To cultivate a love for nature and respect for all forms of life living on the earth

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mr. V. Santharam, teacher of environmental education at Rishi Valley School (December 4, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> *Informational Brochure*. p.3.

<sup>5</sup> For more detail, refer to *Informational Brochure*. p.2

- 3) To enable children to be free of fear in their heart by creating an atmosphere of affection, discipline, and freedom
- 4) To cultivate free exploration by preventing children from being confined within one belief, religion, or political or social concept

The school employs a variety of educational methods and does not follow one fixed method. Teachers do not teach one-sidedly; they emphasize the importance of discussion and interaction between themselves and the students. A 9<sup>th</sup> grade girl at Rishi Valley School said: “Regarding living together with teachers and friends, you can’t live together with others if you keep what you are thinking to yourself. In order to develop trusting relationships, I think that discussion and interaction are important.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Rishi Valley School students, through their daily lives, learn how to build relationships with others.

Dr. Radhika Herzberger, the director of the school, says with regard to the relationship between students and staff:

*At one level, students and staff are in an equal relationship as they are all human beings, regardless of status. This is because both have lots of anger. Both feel uncertain about the future. They may also be ambitious. At this level of feeling, children and staff are all individual human beings and are the same. Children and staff should need to be conscious that they are in this kind of equal relationship rather than one based on power.*<sup>7</sup>

As indicated in this quote, the Rishi Valley School places importance on building equal relationships between staff and students and between students and one another.

Teachers and students walk together within the beautiful natural environment of the Rishi Valley School’s campus. Through this, they “interact with nature’s beauty,” as mentioned in educational principles 1 and 2. Then, based on the foundation of the natural environment, they are able to develop fulfilling human relations through the discussion and interaction mentioned in educational principle number 3.

### **Learning Through Sharing**

The Rishi Valley Education Centre’s activities include not only spreading and passing down of the teachings of Krishnamurti, but contributing to society by providing free educational opportunities for the residents of rural villages and offering health care for residents in surrounding areas. A concrete example of the Centre’s contributions to the broader society is a program that provides children in the surrounding rural villages with free “Rural Schools.”

At present there are eighteen Rural Schools. Each has one teacher and about 30 children. At a glance, the student-teacher ratio would seem to be problematic. However, by dividing students into the following five levels based on capacity of each student, children spend the days learning productively.

Level 1: Students who need support from the teacher (Completely teacher-supported)

Level 2: Students who need partial support from the teacher (Partially teacher-supported)

Level 3: Students who need support from other students (Completely peer-supported)

Level 4: Students who need partial support from other students (Partially peer-supported)

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<sup>6</sup> Survey interview with Rishi Valley School 9<sup>th</sup> grader (December 4, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr. Radhika Herzberger, director of the Rishi Valley Education Centre (December 4, 2006).

## Level 5: Students who can learn without teacher support (Self-learning)

When children are divided into groups based on learning capabilities in this way, one might think that walls are built between children. However, as indicated for Level 3 and Level 4, children in the Rural Schools teach one another and develop additionally through “sharing.”

During this stay, the writer visited one of the Rural Schools, named *Sundra Vanam*.<sup>8</sup> The inside of the classroom was decorated with handicrafts made by the teacher and the students in order to create a fun learning atmosphere. In order to consider the environment and reduce paper consumption, the educational materials were designed to permit repeated use. Thus, the children also learn about environmental issues through sharing their educational materials with other students.

When children are participating in lessons, their seats are not grouped together with those children of the same level. Children in levels 1-5 are distributed equally among the tables. At each table, children work at their own paces with content matching their abilities. If there is something they do not understand, they ask the teacher, or they are helped by one of their friends at the table.

When the writer observed mathematics time, one boy seemed to be having trouble with a calculation problem. The teacher was helping a Level 1 student at another table and did not notice the boy’s trouble. However, a student at the boy’s table noticed how the boy looked and started to use various gestures to teach the boy how to solve the problem. Would this work? The boy who had had his head buried in his arms worked on the problem and then happily approached the teacher to show him the answer. The writer wondered about this and approached to look—the boy’s answer was correct. The teacher had looked very busy while the other student was helping this boy, but in no time the boy became able to solve the problem. This writer couldn’t hide his surprise. Furthermore, the teacher was as happy as if it had been him who had gotten the answer, and the boy was very happy, too, as evidenced by a wide smile on his face. This is just one example, but it demonstrates that educational practices in the Rural Schools enable students not only to develop their academic ability, but to learn about the importance of connectedness in human relations through sharing with others.

## Conclusion

Various initiatives are being implemented under the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). However, the core of ESD is something intangible rather than physical, and ESD is not likely to succeed solely through efforts to address its systemic side. The writer believes that each individual must internalize what is learned through the various opportunities that are presented, and that ESD begins when individuals incorporate what is learned into their daily lives.

At the Rishi Valley Education Centre’s Rishi Valley School and Rural Schools described in this paper, educational practices are being implemented which demonstrate the educational significance of discussion and interaction for making children conscious of the connectedness among people. In addition, environmental preservation activities, such as tree planting, have turned land that was degraded through industrialization to a state where Rishi Valley Education Centre’s students and staff can enjoy the blessings on an abundant natural environment across the campus and live lives where they feel connectedness with nature.

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<sup>8</sup> *Sundra Vanam* is the name of the school in the Telugu language, and is translated as “Beautiful Forest” in English.

As in this example of Rishi Valley Education Centre, each person internalizes in her/his own way what is learned from the educational opportunities provided, and then applies this learning in their daily life. Isn't this the kind of practice we need as we move toward Education for Sustainable Development?

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### **URLs**

- Krishnamurti Foundation India: <http://www.kfionline.org/index.asp>
- Rishi Valley Education Centre: <http://www.rishivalley.org/>