

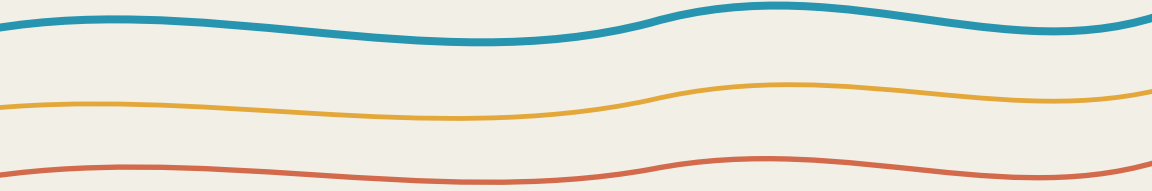


A SCHOOL SANDBOX

ESSAYS ON WALDORF EDUCATION, CHILDHOOD,
AND THE LIFE OF SCHOOLS

ISHA KAKKAD LAKHANI

AUTHOR OF THE BETTER SCHOOL



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AND THE LIFE OF SCHOOLS

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OPEN-ACCESS NOTE

A space to rethink familiar assumptions.

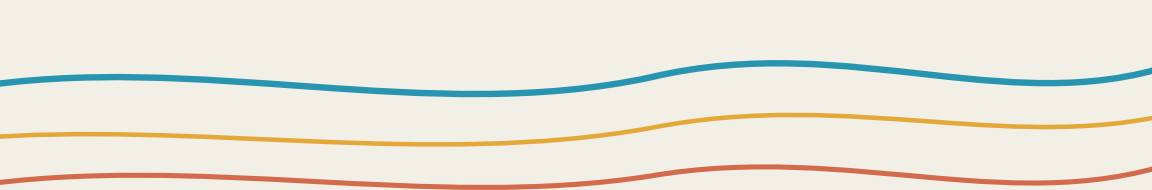
A School Sandbox brings together nine essays emerging from Sangam: A Waldorf Teacher Conference and Isha Kakkad Lakhani's engagement with Yellow Train School. Drawing from lived experiences, the collection expands into wider questions around schooling, childhood, community, educators, parents, leadership, and the environments within which learning unfolds.

These essays are not event reports or session summaries. While Sangam serves as the lived context from which many of the reflections emerge, The Better School remains the philosophical and practical anchor for ideas around learner-centredness, school ecosystems, shared responsibility, learner agency, and the Learning Abyss.

The Better School grew from Isha's work with learners, educators, school leaders, school managements, and parents, alongside a central concern: that schools often become collections of separate efforts rather than coherent ecosystems organised around the learner. Sangam offered many of these ideas a different kind of grounding. It brought them into dialogue with Waldorf practices and questions around teacher preparation, handwork, adolescence, early childhood, school architecture, screen culture, and the everyday life of a school.

Through these essays, readers are invited to look beyond classrooms, curricula, and outcomes, and consider schools as living ecosystems that shape not only how children learn, but also how they grow, relate, belong, and become. Rather than offering fixed answers, A School Sandbox opens a space to rethink familiar assumptions and engage more deeply with the human questions that sit beneath education.

The photographs used throughout this compendium are drawn from Isha's camera, Yellow Train School's website, and from Rajesh Vora's camera, a fellow participant at the conference, who graciously shared his collection with Isha.



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FOREWORD

The author of this remarkable collection of essays, Isha Kakkad Lakhani, came and “entered the sandbox”. Let me tell you about the sand, and the rivers running through it:

Love is work. It can be seen, felt, measured, paid for, underappreciated, desired, admired, incarnated and celebrated. When we experience love, someone has made it happen.

What difference does it make if we place this most human of all values at the heart of education? Yellow Train School, the venue for the conference which inspired these essays, is nothing if not a complex and ambitious project. But at its founding stood this simple sentence: “A school founded on love for children”.

15 years after the initial impulse came Sangam: a conference of confluence. An incarnated vision, opening its doors to grow and to inspire growth through encounter and exchange. In April 2026, about 280 teachers, artists and parents, representing 75 institutions, came together for 9 days in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. We shared keynote presentations, subject and grade-specific mentoring, artistic training, academic papers, networking opportunities and cultural events: a community of joyful learners!



ISHA KAKKAD LAKHANI WITH SVEN SAAR
AT SANGAM CONFERENCE, COIMBATORE



The event was organized by three Indian Waldorf schools and an international Teacher Education initiative called The Modern Teacher.

An ambitious program ran daily from 7 AM to 7 PM, designed to provide opportunities to discover new ideas, deepen our understanding and develop our skills and approaches. Most of us are practitioners in alternative education – many are pioneers, looking beyond materialistic mainstream values.

As one of the initiators of Sangam, I had many hopes and concerns about the impact of our gathering: would we manage to create something that would develop its own life in the souls of the participants? Could we go beyond “I had a lovely time” and “I learned this great new tool” to “I came with a clear expectation and was able to widen my perspective”?

What I love about Isha’s essays is that her starting point differs from mine. She did not come as a Waldorf teacher looking for helpful hints, but as a serious, articulate and highly educated expert who was open to new impulses and willing to create a synergy between her approach “The Better School” and whatever came her way at Sangam.

I am delighted with this collection: an independent, critical as well as enthusiastic mind has examined what we offered, and has made it her own, often in quite unexpected and inspiring ways. You will find much here to nourish you, whether you were in Coimbatore or discover Sangam through Isha’s eyes. I am looking forward to many more such exchanges in the coming years.

These essays illustrate perfectly the confluence metaphor at the heart of Sangam: in flowing together, both rivers are changed, yet neither loses a single drop of water.

Sven Saar

Director

www.modernteacher.org

July 2026

ENTERING THE SANDBOX

A space to try, change, take apart, and begin again.



A sandbox is a curious kind of space. Children rarely enter a sandbox with a fixed plan. They try something, change it, take it apart, and begin again. What matters is not only what finally gets built, but the permission to keep exploring. Over time, I've realised that schools perhaps need spaces like that too.

The Sangam conference stayed with me in ways that were not always immediate. For nine days, more than 250 teachers from across India came together for a Waldorf teacher conference. Some parents were also a part of this gathering. The conference was a collective effort by Yellow Train School and The Modern Teacher, along with a wider community of schools and educators, including Bangalore Steiner School and Swadhaa Waldorf School, who helped shape the experience.

It would be easy to describe Sangam through its visible form: keynote sessions, seminars, artistic explorations, workshops, conversations, tea-breaks, singing, and dancing at Yellow Train School. That description would not be wrong, but it would leave out something important. What stayed with me was the way so many parts of education were allowed to sit beside one another: early childhood care, adolescence, teachers, handwork, science, mathematics, architecture, conflict, burnout, screens, rhythm, stories, parents, community, and the body.

The experience made it difficult to keep education inside its usual compartments. A conversation on adolescence became a question about trust. A clay workshop became a question about effort and material. A school tour became a question about memory and belonging. A session on screens became a question about our bodies, time, and attention. A conversation about teacher wellbeing became a question about the structures that sustain care.



OPENING CEREMONY



A School Sandbox is a collection of nine essays that share my observations and questions that have continued to stay with me long after I left Sangam. Questions that made me pause, return to my own assumptions, and wonder whether there might be other ways of seeing children, schools, and learning. More importantly, I hope they create a space for us to question and further imagine what may be possible within our own schools, not somewhere else, not in an ideal future, but within the realities we already inhabit.

The themes explored across this collection touch questions of childhood, adolescence, teacher wellbeing, learning environments, attention, creativity, school culture, parent and community relationships, and the wider purpose of education itself. They ask: What are schools really nurturing? How do we see children before we begin defining them? What do adolescents need from adults? What role do trust, movement, making, relationships, and spaces play in learning? What happens when technology begins reshaping childhood? And who supports the people responsible for supporting children?

While these questions emerge from particular experiences, I have come to realise through my own work with learners, educators, school leaders, managements, and parents that they are rarely unique to one school. Whether schools differ in pedagogy, location, resources, or philosophy, many of them continue to wrestle with similar concerns. Questions around belonging, wellbeing, attention, agency, trust, community, and what education is ultimately preparing children for seem to travel across classrooms and institutions.

The Better School has shaped the way I think about schools as ecosystems rather than isolated institutions. It has helped me name the importance of learner agency, shared responsibility, and the Learning Abyss, among other things. Sangam gave many of those ideas a different texture. It allowed me to see how educational philosophy appears in small decisions: a bell rung during rain, a train bogie brought into a campus, children trusted at a railway station, teachers asked what they carry into the classroom, and adults reminded that love for children is work.

I have treated these essays as a space to look again at school life, without turning the Yellow Train School into a model to copy. The hope is simpler: to help us notice what we may have stopped seeing clearly. The teacher who continues to find joy in their work, the parent trying to trust a path, the school that keeps adjusting its practice, and the child whose experience asks us to return to the purpose of education. Perhaps the most important work of schools is not only in what they teach, but in what they make possible.



SANGAM PARTICIPANTS

Perhaps the most important work of schools is not only in what they teach, but in what they make possible.

01

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS REALLY NURTURING?

On the visible and invisible work of school life



LOVE BECOMES VISIBLE

“The adult may only be managing a classroom. The child may be learning who they are allowed to be.”



CHILDREN READING INSIDE THE BOGIE LIBRARY

When I first saw the words “a school founded on love for children” at Yellow Train, I paused longer than I expected to.

It is a simple line. Almost too simple, if one reads it quickly. Schools use words like care, excellence, growth, community, and holistic development all the time. These words appear easily on walls, brochures, websites, and admission presentations. After a point, one learns to be cautious with them, not because the words are wrong, but because they can become too easy to say and much harder to live.

At Yellow Train, I found myself reading that sentence through the life of the school around it. Children knew and named the animals on campus. Certain corners felt like they truly belonged to them, not because adults had labelled them as child-friendly, but because children had spent time there and made them their own. I heard stories of children camping overnight at school so they could wake up and watch a retired bogie become part of the campus. Over time, that bogie became their library, a reward, and at times a space that carried their shared dreams for the future. I also heard stories of parents quietly helping the school grow, without turning their support into a display of importance. Educators spoke about the small, quiet rebellions they had begun alongside their learners.



So, the line did not remain only a line. It made me think about what happens when a school tries to take its own words seriously over many years. What happens to love when it has to be organised into timetables, relationships, budgets, classrooms, parent conversations, teacher fatigue, children's conflicts, adolescent risks, and decisions about the future of the institution? What does care become when it has to survive Monday mornings, staff shortages, unfinished syllabi, worried parents, exam expectations, infrastructure costs, and the daily unpredictability of children?

During Sangam, I returned to this question in different forms. Not every session answered it directly, but many of them led back to it. Sven Saar spoke about education as a social force, not a neutral arrangement for delivering information. In another session, he said something that has stayed with me because of how ordinary and demanding it is: love is work.

That sentence helped me understand the Yellow Train line more honestly. In a school, love for children has to survive day-to-day institutional life. It has to show up in effort, structure, adult consistency, fairness, repair, and the willingness to return to the child even when the work becomes tiring. If love remains only a feeling, it will collapse under the weight of schooling. When it becomes work, every adult in the ecosystem has to respond to it.

It also brought me back to a question that has been central to my own work in education: what are schools actually nurturing?

Most of the time, when we speak about school outcomes, we speak in visible terms: marks, admissions, board results, Olympiads, co-curricular achievements, confidence, communication skills, and preparation for the future. These are not unimportant. A school cannot dismiss academic learning or future readiness and still claim to be responsible. Parents are right to care about whether their children are learning well. School managements are right to care about standards. Educators are right to care about clarity, rigour, progress, and discipline.

But these visible outcomes do not tell the whole story of what a school is producing.



THE YELLOW TRAIN BOGIE

A school also shapes what a child thinks learning is. Whether it is something to be explored or something to be completed. Whether mistakes are part of understanding or proof that one is not good enough. Whether asking questions is a sign of curiosity or inconvenience. Whether authority must be obeyed without thought or engaged with respectfully. Whether collaboration is natural or only useful when marks are attached to group work. Whether one's worth is tied to performance, compliance, popularity, talent, neatness, or adult approval.

A learner may never be formally taught these lessons. They may not appear in any curriculum document. No school may consciously decide to teach a learner that silence is safer than curiosity, or that being fast is better than being careful, or that being easy for adults is the same as being good. Yet children learn these things through repetition. They learn from how adults respond when they make mistakes. They learn from who receives patience and who receives irritation. They learn from which children are trusted with responsibility. They learn from whether support staff are treated with dignity. They learn from whether parents and educators speak to one another as partners or as opposing sides. They learn from whether school leadership listens to teachers, and whether teachers feel safe enough to speak honestly.

I keep returning to the idea of school as an ecosystem for this reason. A school is never made only by curriculum. It is made by relationships, routines, decisions, spaces, histories, aspirations, anxieties, and the countless habits that settle into daily life. The learner may not be able to name all of these influences, but they live inside them for years.

In *The Better School*, I have written about the difference between how adults understand school and how children experience it. Adults often understand school as an institution. We see the board, the affiliation, the timetable, the syllabus, the governance structure, the admission process, the fee model, the hierarchy, the calendar, the assessments, the policies, and the reports. We know that a school has to be managed. We know that structures are needed. Without systems, a school can become chaotic and unsustainable.

Children do not begin there.

For a young child, school begins with unfamiliar faces, new routines, a teacher who is present, other children who gradually become friends, a classroom that becomes recognisable, a corridor that becomes familiar, a place in the playground, a corner in the library, a bus route, a smell, a sound, a rhythm. The school becomes real through people and repeated experiences long before it becomes an institution in the child's mind.

This difference between adult perception and child experience changes what we pay attention to. If we see school only as an institution, improvement begins to mean better systems, better policies, better academic plans, better infrastructure, better reporting, better branding, better results. All of these may be necessary. But if we also see school as a community in which a child is forming a sense of self, then we have to ask a wider set of questions.



COMMEMORATING THE ARRIVAL OF THE BOGIE



Does the child feel known without being fixed into a label? Does the child experience discipline as fear or as structure? Does the child learn responsibility by being trusted, or only by being corrected? Does the child see adults collaborating, or only instructing? Does the child encounter difference with curiosity or hierarchy? Does the child experience learning as something connected to life, or as a series of compartments that exist for the school alone?

These questions are harder to measure, which may be one reason we do not stay with them for long enough. Schools are surrounded by visible pressures. Parents want to know whether their children are keeping up. Managements have to sustain the institution. Educators have to complete syllabi, maintain classrooms, respond to parents, prepare learners, and handle the emotional reality of each day. Society rewards schools that can display success in recognisable ways. Under these conditions, the measurable receives more attention than the meaningful.

But learners are spending twelve years inside these environments. Twelve years is a long time in the life of a learner. It is long enough for confidence to grow or shrink. It is long enough for curiosity to be strengthened or trained out. It is long enough for a learner to begin seeing themselves as capable, average, difficult, gifted, invisible, responsible, careless, creative, weak, obedient, troublesome, or full of possibility. Many of these identities do not form in a single moment. They gather through repeated experiences.

A teacher waits a few seconds longer for one learner to answer and moves on quickly from another. A school gives one group another chance and decides that another group has lost the right to be trusted. A parent repeatedly asks about marks before asking about learning. A report card describes achievement but not effort, participation, care, friendship, persistence, or self-understanding. A child who speaks well is assumed to understand more than a child who struggles to express what they know. A child who sits still is assumed to be more ready to learn than a child whose body is still finding its way into attention.



None of this usually comes from cruelty. Most adults around children are trying, in their own ways, to do what they believe is right. The problem is that schooling can turn repeated adult convenience into a child's long-term self-belief. The adult may only be managing a classroom. The child may be learning who they are allowed to be.

The phrase "love is work" prevents love from becoming decorative in education. To love children in a school is not only to feel warmly towards them. It is to build conditions in which they can grow with dignity. It is to examine whether our systems are fair. It is to notice when sameness is being mistaken for equity. It is to ask whether a child's behaviour is being understood or only controlled. It is to create spaces where teachers are supported enough to remain humane. It is to involve parents without allowing fear to dominate the child's life. It is to remember support staff as part of the learner's world. It is to design school life in a way that protects childhood while preparing children for adulthood.

This kind of work is practical, demanding, and often inconvenient. It asks school managements, educators, parents, and society to take children's daily experience as seriously as visible outcomes. It asks educators to see themselves not only as subject experts but as adults who shape the emotional and social life of the classroom. It asks parents to look at their own aspirations and anxieties with honesty. It asks society to stop treating schools as service providers alone and recognise them as places where the next generation practises how to live with others.

When we ignore this, schools continue producing outcomes, but they may also produce losses. A learner may score well and still lose confidence in their own thinking. A child may complete a syllabus and still not know how concepts connect to the world. A school may celebrate discipline and still produce young people who wait for instructions before acting. A classroom may appear orderly while some children slowly disconnect from learning. These are the kinds of losses I have called the Learning Abyss: the gaps that accumulate when learning becomes something to move through rather than something the learner owns.

The Learning Abyss is not only academic. It can also be emotional, social, relational, and imaginative. We see it when children stop asking questions because they have learnt that questions slow things down. We see it when a learner performs well but cannot think independently. We see it when children begin to believe that their value lies in being easy to praise. We see it when a school becomes satisfied with visible success while the learner's inner relationship with learning weakens.

The value of Sangam, for me, lies in what it allows us to ask afterwards. If a school is founded on love for children, what does that love require from adults? If children experience school as a community before they understand it as an institution, how should institutions behave? If education shapes not only knowledge but identity, responsibility, relationships, courage, and imagination, then what should we look for when we look at a school?

A school may teach mathematics, science, languages, history, art, music, sport, technology, and life skills. It may prepare learners for examinations, universities, careers, and the future. It should do these things well. Alongside all of this, a school is also shaping the learner's relationship with themselves, with others, with authority, with uncertainty, with effort, with failure, with joy, with work, and with the world.

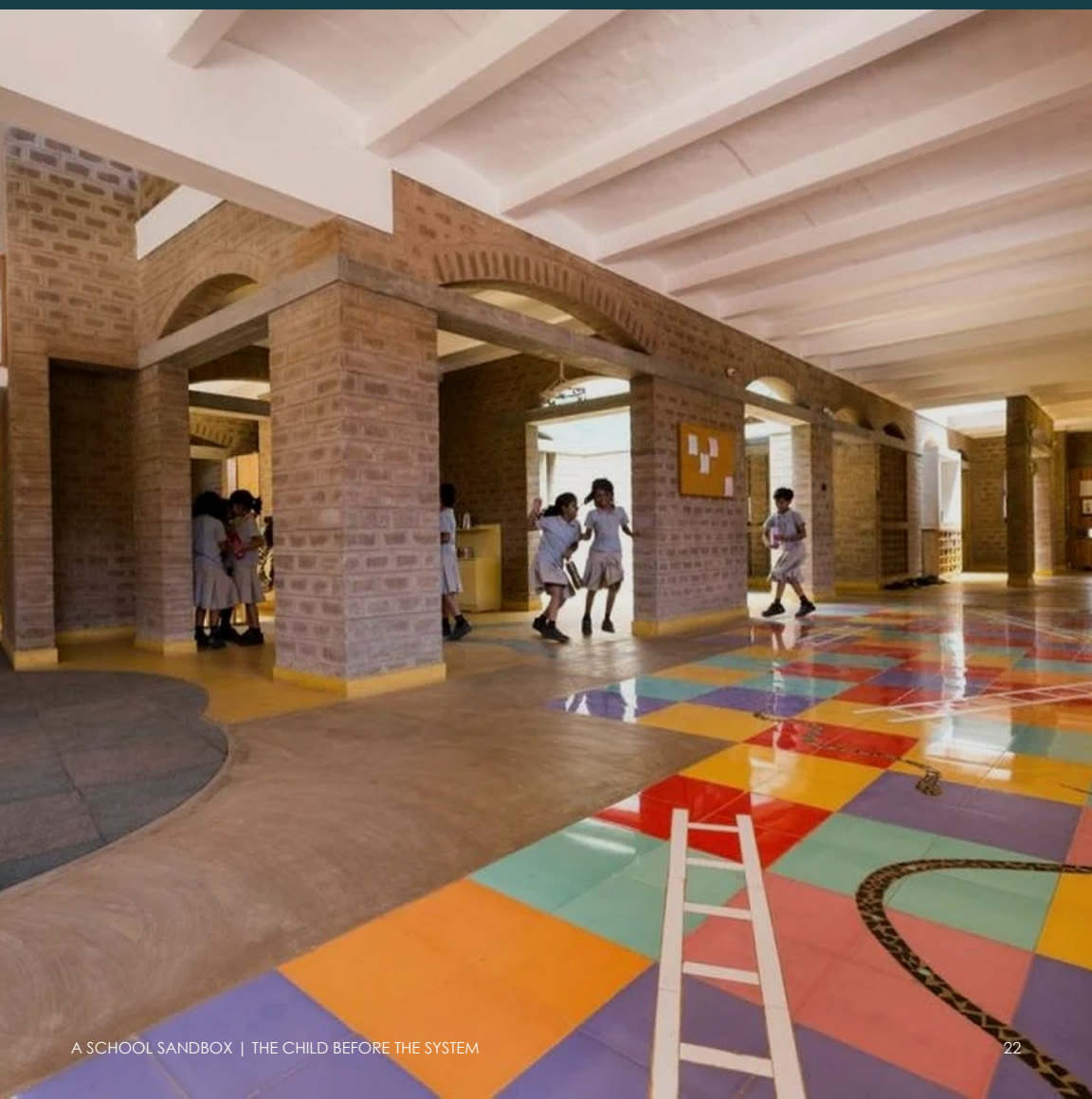
So when we ask what schools are making, the answer cannot be limited to academic achievement. Schools are also making memories, habits, assumptions, fears, forms of confidence, ways of listening, ways of asking, ways of belonging, and ways of imagining what one can become.

Before the curriculum, before the assessment, before the child is described as bright, quiet, difficult, creative, restless, or responsible, there is a child standing in front of adults who already carry expectations. If we are going to understand what schools make, we have to look carefully at how adults first learn to see the child.

The adult may only be managing a classroom. The child may be learning who they are allowed to be.

02 THE CHILD BEFORE THE SYSTEM

On adult expectations, early childhood, and how children read us



CHILDREN READ THE ROOM

“Children are always reading you. What kind of a book are you?”

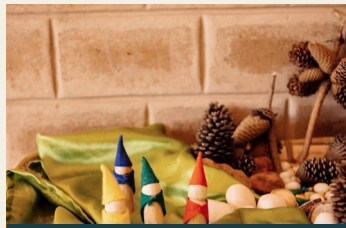
To ask what schools are making, we also have to look at the child standing before any system begins to describe them.

This is harder than it sounds because adults are very quick to believe that they have understood children. Sometimes we understand them through affection. Sometimes through worry. Sometimes through comparison. Sometimes through our own memories of school. Sometimes through categories that have become so familiar that they feel harmless: bright, weak, quiet, difficult, distracted, creative, obedient, shy, careless, mature, naughty, gifted, slow, sensitive, attention-seeking.

These words may begin as observations, but over time they can become containers. A child who has been called responsible may be trusted before they are ready, and a child who has been called careless may be doubted even when they are trying. A child who has been called bright may become afraid of not knowing. A child who has been called weak may stop expecting themselves to understand. A child who has been called disruptive may learn to enter every room already carrying the expectation of correction.



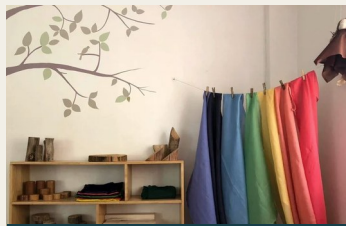
HANDMADE DOLLS



NATURAL MATERIALS FOR PLAY



AN EARLY-YEARS ROOM



MATERIALS FOR FREE PLAY



Naming a child's difficulty can be necessary. Educators need language to notice anxiety, withdrawal, high ability, impulsiveness, struggle, or the need for support. Parents and school leaders also need ways to speak about development. The problem begins when the name becomes more fixed than the child. A useful observation can become a permanent category when adults stop looking after they have named it.

At Sangam, Sven Saar spoke about the Pygmalion effect, and it gave me another way to think about this. The idea is often explained through the work of Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, who explored how teacher expectations could influence learner performance. When teachers believed that certain learners had strong potential for growth, those expectations affected the way teachers interacted with them. The learners had not changed overnight. The adult's belief had changed the environment around them.

For me, the useful part is not the study as a neat psychological reference. It is the everyday educational reality beneath it. Expectations rarely stay private inside adults. They show up in tone, timing, patience, opportunity, correction, and trust. An educator who believes a learner can think through a difficult answer may wait a little longer before intervening. A parent who believes their child can handle responsibility may allow them to try before stepping in. A teacher who believes a learner is always disruptive may notice disruption more quickly than effort. A school that believes certain learners are not ready for leadership may never give them situations in which leadership can develop.

Children may not hear the adult's private thought, but they live inside the adult's response.

This is why something that Aarti Rajaratnam said during her session at Sangam has stayed with me: "Children are always reading you. What kind of a book are you?"

It is a deceptively simple question. Children read whether our attention is genuine, whether we are hurried, whether rules are fair or mood-dependent, whether affection changes with performance, and whether we are interested in who they are or only in what they have done.

An adult who remains curious about a child creates a different environment from one who has stopped being surprised.

This becomes especially important in the early years, when the child is still learning the meaning of school through people, rhythm, safety, and belonging.

Adults need routines, of course. We need safety, rhythm, clarity, and structure. A classroom cannot run on affection alone. But the child's first experience of structure comes through the adult who receives them, the tone in which instructions are given, the way transitions happen, the way a mistake is handled, and the way other children are helped to include or exclude.

The early childhood conversations at Sangam made this especially clear. In the Waldorf approach, educators spoke about the adult preparing themselves before the child arrives. The preparation was not only about arranging materials or planning activities. It was about the adult's own state. Young children do not need endless explanation. They absorb through imitation, rhythm, movement, and participation. If the adult is scattered, rushed, irritated, or anxious, the room receives that. If the adult is steady, clear, and present, the child receives that too.

This view of childhood is practical. Young children learn through their bodies before they learn through instruction. They watch how adults move. They imitate how things are done. They enter routines through repetition. They understand safety through predictability. In these discussions, educators described early childhood development through a simple sequence: body first, then hands, then brain. It is a reminder that intellectual abstraction does not stand alone. The child first learns through movement, sensory experience, imitation, touch, rhythm, and relationship.



When schools forget this, they may begin treating young children as smaller versions of older learners. More explanation. More worksheets. More direct instruction. More visible output. More early preparation for later academic expectations. The child may comply, and compliance can easily be mistaken for readiness. A young child sitting still with a worksheet may look like learning is taking place. But stillness is not the same as attention, and output is not always the same as understanding.

Free play, in this context, is not a break from learning. It is one of the ways children reveal themselves. In the early years group at Sangam, educators spoke about simple, elemental materials: wooden blocks, cloths, pebbles, natural textures, music, and objects connected to the earth. Such materials do not decide the game in advance. A cloth can become a river, a roof, a blanket, a costume, a boundary, or a secret. A block can become a house, a vehicle, a tower, a phone, a shop counter, or nothing in particular until another child gives it meaning. The child's imagination does not have to fit into a pre-designed function.

When children play freely in a thoughtfully prepared environment, adults get to observe how they negotiate, lead, follow, repeat, transform, include, resist, repair, and imagine. These observations can be far more revealing than many formal assessments. A child who does not speak much in circle time may become highly expressive in play. A child who struggles with direct instruction may show complex planning while building. A child who appears confident may become rigid when another child changes the game. A child who is labelled difficult may reveal a strong sense of justice. A child who is seen as quiet may be carrying a rich inner world that appears only when the adult stops demanding immediate articulation.

Adult expectations need patience. If we decide too early who a child is, we may stop observing. We may begin collecting evidence for a conclusion we have already reached.



Storytelling offered another way to understand this. Robyn Davis spoke about the care needed when telling stories to young children. Even the way an adult performs a wolf or a bear matters. If the adult exaggerates terror, the child may absorb fear before having the inner capacity to process it. If the adult labels a character too quickly as bad or evil, the child may receive a moral judgement before they have had time to encounter the story inwardly. Repetition becomes important because children live with stories over time. A story told across days allows images, feelings, rhythms, and meanings to settle slowly. Only after that may puppetry or enactment bring the story into another form.

This approach asks adults to trust that children are doing inner work even when they are not explaining it. A child listening to a story repeatedly may not be producing an answer, but something is being formed. Language, imagination, emotion, memory, fear, courage, foolishness, mischief, kindness, and difficulty can all be encountered symbolically before they become moral instruction. Healing stories, regional stories, stories of ants, bees, snails, rivers, seasons, and landscapes allow children to meet the world in forms that are close to experience but not overly direct.

There is a kind of adult impatience that wants children to show us what they have learnt immediately. What is the moral of the story? What did you understand? What colour is this? What number comes next? What did you make? What did you learn today? These questions are not wrong, but when they become the only way we recognise learning, we may miss the slower processes through which children absorb and arrange the world inside themselves.

Children are always learning, but not always in the format adults prefer.

That is one reason I am cautious with early categorisation. A child's development does need attention, and difficulties should not be ignored in the name of romanticising childhood. If a child needs help with speech, movement, social interaction, reading readiness, emotional regulation, or sensory processing, adults must respond. But there is a difference between responding to need and reducing the child to the need. Support should widen the child's possibilities, not narrow the adult's imagination of them.



The Pygmalion effect becomes relevant here not because every child will become what adults expect. Children are not clay in adult hands. They have temperaments, histories, capacities, desires, resistances, and inner lives of their own. But children do grow in environments shaped by adult belief. An adult who remains curious about a child creates a different environment from one who has stopped being surprised.

Some alternative schools can feel different from many mainstream schools because they begin with observation rather than immediate categorisation. They may still teach literacy, numeracy, science, art, movement, and social responsibility. They may still have routines and expectations. But their starting question is often closer to: who is this child? That question changes the adult's posture. Behaviour becomes something to understand before it is corrected. Struggle becomes something to investigate before it is named as inability. Silence becomes something to observe before it is treated as absence. Energy becomes something to work with before it is dismissed as disruption.

Mainstream schools can also ask this question. It does not belong only to alternative education. A school does not need a particular philosophy or campus to begin seeing learners more carefully. It needs time, training, language, and a shared commitment among adults to keep the learner larger than the category.

School management has an important role here. If teachers are given no time to observe, they will rely on quick labels. If classrooms are overcrowded, if timetables are rushed, if reporting formats demand simplified categories, if parent conversations revolve only around performance, and if school culture rewards easy learners more than understood learners, then even thoughtful educators will struggle to keep seeing each learner fully. Observation cannot be an individual virtue alone. It has to be supported structurally.

Parents also have to examine the expectations they carry into school. Many parental expectations come from love and fear. We want our children to be safe, prepared, successful, socially accepted, emotionally strong, academically capable, and future-ready. These are understandable desires. But sometimes the child receives the anxiety more strongly than the love. A parent may say, “I only want what is best for you,” while the child hears, “You are not enough as you are.” A parent may ask about marks because they are worried about the future, while the child hears that marks are the main proof of worth.

This essay asks us to look at one of the earliest and most continuous experiences in school: how adults see the child. Before the timetable, assessment, label, intervention, leadership opportunity, or disciplinary note, there is the adult gaze. That gaze can become narrow or generous. It can become fixed or curious. It can become anxious or trusting. It can help the child feel known, or it can make the child feel already decided.

None of this means children should be left without boundaries. Children need adults. They need rhythm, correction, repetition, limits, safety, guidance, and sometimes firm intervention. But boundaries work differently when the child feels seen. Correction lands differently when it does not threaten belonging. Support works differently when it does not reduce the child to deficiency. Expectations work differently when they are held as invitations rather than verdicts.

A child before the system is not empty. The child is already sensing, imitating, interpreting, resisting, imagining, and forming a relationship with the world. It is up to adults and schools to honour that, or to cover it too quickly with categories of performance and behaviour.

Children are always learning, but not always in the format adults prefer.

03 ADOLESCENCE, TRUST, AND THE PRACTICE OF RESPONSIBILITY

On designed trust, transition, and practising adulthood



TRUST MUST BE PRACTISED

“Responsibility does not develop fully before it is practised.”



SANTHYA ON ADOLESCENCE

By the time children reach adolescence, many adults have already formed a fairly strong idea of what to expect from them.

We may not always say it directly, but the language around teenagers is rarely neutral. They are described as moody, rebellious, distracted, hormonal, secretive, careless, overconfident, confused, difficult to speak to, too influenced by friends, too attached to their phones, too unwilling to listen, and too eager to argue. To an extent, some of this comes from real experience. Adolescence can be demanding for parents and educators. Teenagers do become more private. Their emotional responses can feel disproportionate. Their friendships begin to carry more weight. They question rules that they may have accepted earlier. They want independence without always showing the judgement adults would like to see alongside it.

But adults need to separate the adolescent from the discomfort the adolescent creates in us.



During Sangam, Santhya led a session on adolescence that began from this adult discomfort. We moved in circles, meeting different people, responding to prompts around the popular narrative of teenagers and the words that came to mind when we heard adolescence or puberty. The exercise was simple, but the pattern became visible very quickly. Even when the words were affectionate or humorous, many of them carried some version of difficulty. Teenagers were being understood through the problems adults experience around them.

The true-or-false activity that followed made this even clearer. When we are asked to respond quickly, we often discover how much we already believe. We may think of ourselves as reflective adults, but around adolescence many of us carry ready-made assumptions. Some of them come from research, some from our own teenage years, some from the children we have known, and some from stories repeated so often that they begin to feel like truth.

I did not come away from the session thinking that adults are simply unfair to adolescents. That would be too easy, and not entirely honest. Adults are often anxious because adolescence does carry real risks. The consequences of decisions begin to change. A younger child's mistake may be easier to contain. A teenager's mistake can involve safety, peer influence, reputation, academic choices, emotional intensity, sexuality, substances, money, travel, digital life, and future pathways. Parents and educators are not imagining the weight of this phase. They are responding to it.

But anxiety cannot become the only lens through which we see the adolescent.

Adolescence is a developmental phase before it is a behavioural problem. Teenagers are not simply becoming difficult. They are also becoming aware of themselves in new ways. They are learning how they are seen by others. They are forming stronger peer relationships. They are testing values that were earlier inherited without examination. They are beginning to ask where they belong, what they believe, what they can decide for themselves, and how much of their life is truly theirs.

Fear and readiness can exist together.

In *The Better School*, I have written about the twelve-year journey of a learner through different stages. The later school years cannot be treated only as preparation for examinations or college admissions. They are also the years in which a learner needs opportunities to move from participation to ownership. The middle years ask for experimentation, identity formation, peer negotiation, and growing independence. The senior years ask for responsibility, decision-making, future-oriented thinking, and the ability to act with some awareness of consequence. If schools do not design for this shift, learners are left to practise adulthood outside the school's care, often in spaces where the risks are higher and the adults are less available.

Santhya's story of Yellow Train's graduating batch made this very concrete.

The learners were nearing the end of school. They approached their teacher with a question that sounded ordinary at first: what were the plans for their last Children's Day? In another school, this may have led to a farewell programme, a celebration, a performance, a meal, a few photographs, some speeches, and the familiar emotional grammar of final-year events. There would have been nothing wrong with that. Rituals matter. School endings deserve recognition.

But Santhya heard something else in the question. The students were not only asking for an event. They were naming an in-between moment in their lives. They were still children in one sense, and almost adults in another. They were marking the last time they could claim Children's Day as their own. They may not have used the language of transition, but that is what they were standing inside.

The school could have responded by organising something for them. Instead, it designed an experience that asked something of them.

The learners were first asked to write letters to their parents. The next morning, the learners and their parents were asked to arrive together at a railway station at five in the morning. Learners handed their letters to their parents and in return, the school gave the learners an envelope containing tickets to a destination they had to reach on their own as a group. They spent the day navigating a set of experiences without phones and without adults accompanying them.

Seen only from the outside, the story can sound like an adventure: teenagers at a railway station, no phones, no parents, no teachers visibly directing them. It sounds liberating and brave. It also sounds like the kind of thing that many adults would immediately find irresponsible.

What made the experience educational was not the absence of adults. It was the care with which trust had been designed.

A great deal had to be thought through before that morning. Learners needed clarity and preparation. Parents needed to understand what was being asked of them and why. Educators had to consider safety, logistics, communication, risk, emergency possibilities, group dynamics, and the emotional meaning of the exercise. The school had to hold its own anxiety as an institution. The adults had not disappeared. They had changed their position.



LEARNERS NAVIGATING TOGETHER



Trust is often misunderstood as looseness. In school life, the more useful question is not whether adults should supervise or trust, protect or allow freedom, control or let go. The harder work is deciding what kind of structure makes trust possible. Trust without thought can become negligence. Control without trust can become fear. Adolescents need carefully held experiences in which responsibility can be practised while adults remain attentive to safety, preparation, and repair.

The Children's Day experience worked because the students were given responsibility within an adult-designed frame. The frame did not remove difficulty. It made the difficulty meaningful. The students still had to navigate, decide, coordinate, manage discomfort, and depend on one another. But they were not abandoned to prove themselves in a vacuum. They were being told, through the design of the experience, that the adults around them believed they were ready to carry something more than instruction.

This is one of the central questions of adolescence. When do we begin allowing young people to carry responsibility, and what do we communicate when we delay that trust for too long?

Many schools and families follow a proof-first model. Show us that you are responsible, and then we will trust you. On the surface, this sounds reasonable. Adults have to make judgements. Freedom cannot be handed over without any sense of readiness. But responsibility does not develop fully before it is practised. A young person cannot learn judgement only by being protected from every situation that requires judgement. They cannot learn independence only by obeying instructions. They cannot learn to be trustworthy if trust is always postponed until after perfection.

This tension became clearer in the next part of Santhya's story.

When another graduating batch reached the same stage, adults did not feel the same confidence. Some learners in the cohort had been labelled difficult. There had been concerns around rule-breaking, suspension, reliability, and trust. Educators were understandably hesitant. If a group has already tested boundaries, the safest institutional response is to reduce freedom. Schools know how to do this. One batch makes a mistake, and future batches inherit restrictions. A small incident becomes a policy. A risk becomes a reason to close the door. The logic is familiar because it protects the institution from uncertainty.

In that situation, Santhya chose not to withdraw the opportunity.

That choice deserves attention because it was not a sentimental belief that teenagers will always rise beautifully to trust. There were concerns. There were incidents. There were reasons to worry. But removing the experience would also have taught something. It would have told learners that trust belongs only to those who already fit adult expectations. It would have made autonomy a reward for the well-behaved rather than a condition through which growth can happen. It would have allowed one version of adolescent behaviour to define the whole person, and perhaps the whole group.

Schools often underestimate how strongly young people read such decisions. They know when adults have already decided who is reliable. They know who is given another chance and who is not. They know whether a mistake becomes a conversation or a permanent identity. They know whether responsibility is being offered as part of growing up or withheld as punishment. Even when they resist adult judgement, they are shaped by it.

This does not mean every adolescent should be given the same freedom at the same time in the same way. That would be careless. Development is not uniform, and schools have to respond to context. But equity in adolescence cannot mean trusting only the easiest students. It has to include the more difficult work of designing pathways through which even the learners who worry us, can practise responsibility with support.



PLAYING ON CAMPUS



One detail from the session changed the way I understood the story. When learners later wrote anonymously about the experience, many of them admitted that they were scared.

That admission complicates the way adults often speak about teenagers. We assume they are reckless when they ask for freedom. We assume they want distance because they do not need us. We assume that risk-taking means absence of fear. But fear and readiness can exist together. A young person may want independence and still feel frightened by it. They may resist adult control and still need adult containment. They may appear confident outside while carrying uncertainty inside.

Adults need more precision during adolescence. Children often show need in ways adults can recognise. They cry, ask, cling, narrate, seek comfort, and return visibly to the adults they trust. Adolescents may show need through withdrawal, irritation, sarcasm, silence, defiance, overconfidence, or the refusal to ask for help. If we respond only to the surface, we may miss the vulnerability underneath it.

In schools, this is especially important because adolescence does not happen in one clean stage. The transition from Grade 7 to 8 is not the same as the transition from Grade 9 to 10 or Grade 11 to 12. The questions change. The pressure changes. The body changes. The social world changes. The academic stakes change. The future begins to feel closer. A learner who was earlier trying to understand friendship may later be trying to understand identity, then choice, then consequence, then ambition, then fear of failure, then separation from school itself.

A school that takes adolescence seriously has to build more than discipline systems. It has to build experiences, conversations, rituals, responsibilities, and feedback mechanisms that recognise these shifts. Learners need opportunities to lead, plan, fail, repair, reflect, and try again. They need adults who do not confuse obedience with maturity. They need structures that do not collapse at the first sign of difficulty. They need guidance that respects their growing dignity without pretending that they no longer need care.



Parents need support in this shift as well. It is not easy to move from managing a child's life to witnessing a teenager begin to make decisions that may not match our timing, our fears, or our sense of safety. Many parents increase control because they are afraid of what freedom may cost. That fear is not unreasonable. But if control becomes the only response, the adolescent may learn to hide rather than to think. They may learn to perform compliance while practising independence elsewhere. They may learn that adults are safest when kept uninformed.

Educators face a different version of the same challenge. In a classroom, trust cannot be built only through warmth. It requires clarity. Adolescents need to know the boundaries of an experience, the reason behind them, and the consequences of breaking them. They also need to know that a mistake will be treated as information, not only as evidence against them. An educator who is working with adolescents is constantly balancing the need to protect the group, respect the individual, maintain fairness, and keep possibility open.

School managements carry their own pressures. Trust-based experiences are much harder to justify than supervised ones. They require parental confidence, institutional courage, documentation, planning, and the willingness to stand behind educators. If a school speaks about learner agency but does not support educators when they design responsible autonomy, the idea remains fragile. It is easy to celebrate responsibility in principle and difficult to hold the uncertainty that comes with allowing young people to practise it.

This brings us back to the school ecosystem. Adolescence cannot be handled only by individual teachers. A school has to decide what it believes about young people. Are they problems to be contained until they become adults, or are they people in transition who need meaningful practice in becoming adults? That belief will show up in timetables, permissions, leadership roles, disciplinary processes, learner councils, excursions, classroom dialogue, assessment, counselling, parent communication, and the way adults speak about learners when learners are not in the room.

The Children's Day story remains with me because it shows what it can look like when a school treats adolescence as a phase that deserves care and attention. The experience was not large because it involved a journey. It was large because it recognised a threshold. It allowed young people to feel the weight of responsibility while still being held by the thoughtfulness of adults. It gave parents a role in the transition without making them the managers of the day. It asked educators to carry risk without turning risk into carelessness. It gave learners a memory of being trusted before they had fully become the adults they were preparing to be.

Most schools may not be able to recreate that exact experience, and they do not need to. The form is less important than the principle behind it. Every school can ask where responsibility is being practised. Where are learners allowed to make decisions that carry real consequence? Where do they get to repair after mistakes? Where do they learn to hold a group, plan an event, care for a younger child, manage resources, speak honestly, disagree respectfully, or experience freedom with accountability? Where are they trusted in ways that help them become worthy of trust?

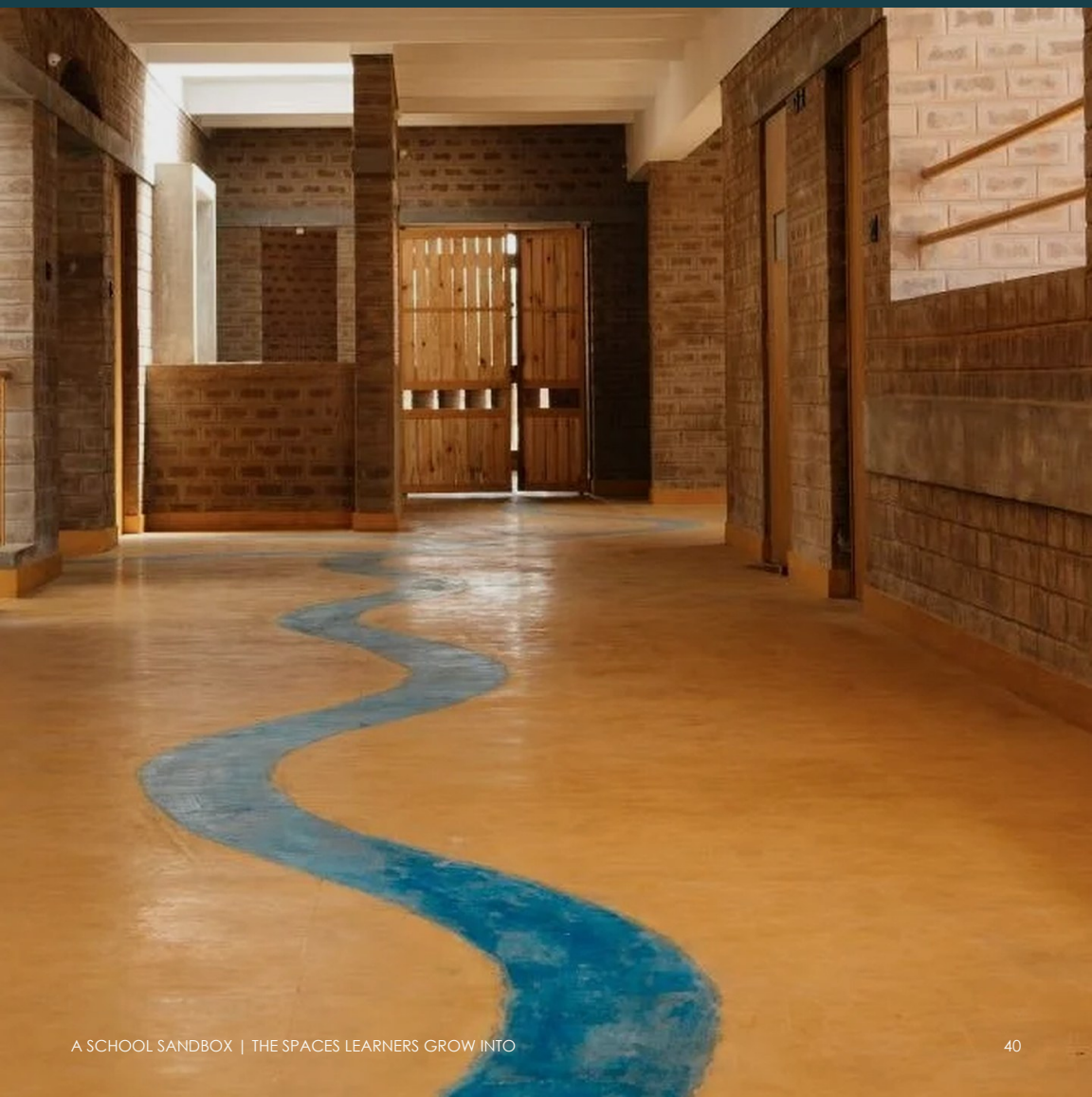
If schools are nurturing human beings, adolescence is one of the phases in which this nurturing becomes most visible and most uncomfortable. The teenager is no longer only receiving the world adults have built. They are beginning to test it, question it, and resist it. Schools also have to help them counter some parts of that world: the pressure to perform, the pull of peer approval, the speed of digital life, the habit of hiding difficulty, and the belief that independence means having no need for guidance.

No one becomes responsible in theory. Responsibility grows through the experience of carrying something real, with enough support to learn from what happens. Adolescents need adults who remember this, especially when their behaviour makes trust difficult.

No one becomes responsible in theory.

04 THE SPACES LEARNERS GROW INTO

On architecture, memory, belonging, and the lived curriculum of school spaces



SPACES HOLD MEMORY

“Memory does not follow the school map prepared by adults.”



Whenever I visit a school, I have realised that I do not look only at classrooms. Classrooms matter, of course. A great deal of school life takes place there, and the arrangement of a classroom tells us many things about what the school expects learning to look like. But my attention usually goes elsewhere as well. I look at corridors, steps, trees, corners, libraries, outdoor spaces, canteen areas, bus zones, thresholds, and all the places where children gather when adults have not directly asked them to gather there.

I want to know where learners go before school begins. Where they sit when they do not want to join a game. Where they stand when they are waiting for a friend. Where younger learners feel safe enough to pause. Where older learners feel they can speak without being overheard. Where someone cries and another learner stays back. Where learners return again and again, not because it has been assigned to them, but because the place has become part of their school life.

These details may sound small when compared with curriculum, teacher training, assessment systems, board results, and school policies. But learners spend years inside school spaces. They do not experience school only through formal instruction. They experience it through where they are allowed to move, where they are expected to sit, what they can touch, what they are asked not to touch, which places feel open, which places feel controlled, which spaces are only for adults, and which spaces they can gradually make their own.

In *The Better School*, I have written about how school infrastructure is often understood through utility. Are the classrooms adequate? Are the laboratories equipped? Is the library accessible? Are the playgrounds safe? Are the spaces clean, comfortable, and well maintained? These questions are necessary. A school cannot ignore safety, hygiene, accessibility, and functional planning. But if we stop there, we miss another layer. Infrastructure is not only about where learning is delivered, it also shapes how learners belong.

The ability of school spaces to bring learners together as a community is often underestimated. A corridor can remain a corridor, or it can become the place where children exchange stories before class. A staircase can remain a way to move between floors, or it can become a place where seniors and juniors sit together during breaks. A library can remain a room of books, or it can become a place where a child learns that reading can be private, social, adventurous, and restful. A playground can remain a scheduled sports class, or it can become the place where learners negotiate rules, status, fairness, exclusion, courage, and repair.

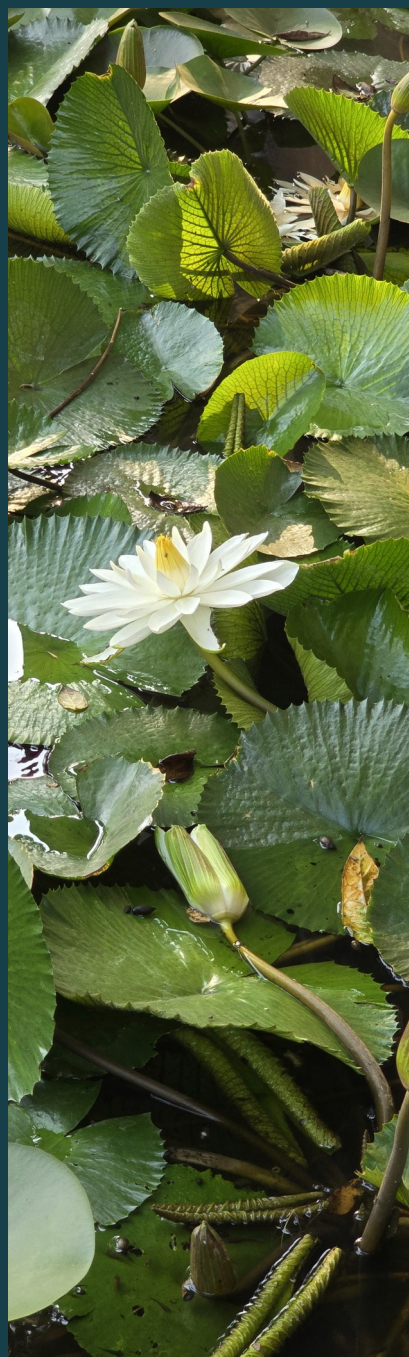
When I was at Yellow Train, the question of space became difficult to ignore.



THE HIGH SCHOOL CORRIDOR

The tour began at the Arangam, an open assembly space with broad steps where learners gather. From there, the campus did not feel like a sequence of buildings that had to be covered one by one. It felt like a place where many decisions had been made with learners' experience in mind. There were cows grazing on the farm, goats, and dogs named by learners. There were trees carrying tiny red and black seeds or pearls that learners enjoyed collecting. There were pathways that curved instead of moving only in straight, efficient lines. A river appeared across the school floor, moving through the campus in a way that children could keep following and discovering. There were arches rather than sharp edges, low wooden stools, secret corners, slides, snake-and-ladder patterns, and leaf impressions on the floor.

None of these details need to be romanticised. A school remains a school. It has timetables, constraints, adult responsibilities, budgets, maintenance issues, safety concerns, and daily practicalities. But the details matter because they change what a learner can notice. A floor with leaf imprints gives a learner something to discover after walking over it many times. A small hidden detail on an archway may not be noticed on the first day, but it may be found on the hundredth. A path that bends can slow a learner's attention in a way that a straight corridor may not. Movable furniture gives learners a different relationship with the room from fixed rows that tell everyone exactly how bodies must be arranged.



THE LOTUS POND

It is tempting to call all this aesthetic. That would make it sound optional, like beauty added after the serious work of education has already been planned. But for learners, texture, light, shade, scale, sound, smell, and touch become part of how they remember a place. Years after leaving school, many of us remember the patch of shade where we waited after lunch, the window from which we looked out, the tree we sat under, the staircase where everyone gathered, the corner of the library that felt like ours, or the spot on the playground where teams were made.

Memory does not follow the school map prepared by adults. It follows use, feeling, repetition, and relationships.

The Yellow Train bogie stayed with me for this reason. The retired train bogie had once been put up for auction. Inspired by Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window, the school decided to bring it into the campus. Even the act of bringing it there became part of the school's memory. The logistics were not simple. There were cranes, narrow roads, and even the temporary breaking of a neighbouring farm wall with the promise that it would be rebuilt. Learners spent more hours than usual at school waiting for its arrival, and the story became part of how the school remembers itself.



TREE MURAL ETCHED WITH NAMES OF CHILDREN



If the story had ended there, the bogie could have remained a charming object. But what interested me was that the bogie continued to have a life inside the school. It became part reading room, part library, part reward, part gathering place, part dream-space. Learners could earn their time at the bogie after completing a reading challenge. A certain number of books could give them a few hours there. Reading, in that arrangement, did not remain only a task to be completed. It became linked with anticipation, place, memory, and community.

Learner's relationship with learning is often shaped by their surroundings. If reading is always attached to tests, summaries, corrections, and visible proof, a learner may read for performance. If reading is also attached to a bogie, a letter to an author, a conversation with a character, an earned experience, or a place they speak about with excitement, then reading can become part of life rather than only part of schoolwork.

The same is true of outdoor spaces. I heard the story of a bell being rung when it rained so children could go outside and experience it. A school could, for practical reasons, respond to rain only by keeping learners indoors, protecting uniforms, avoiding mud, preventing wet corridors, and keeping the day orderly. These are not foolish concerns. Getting wet leads to clean up and care afterwards. Floors become slippery. Clothes become uncomfortable. Routines get disturbed. Still, there is something for a learner when rain is not treated as an interruption.

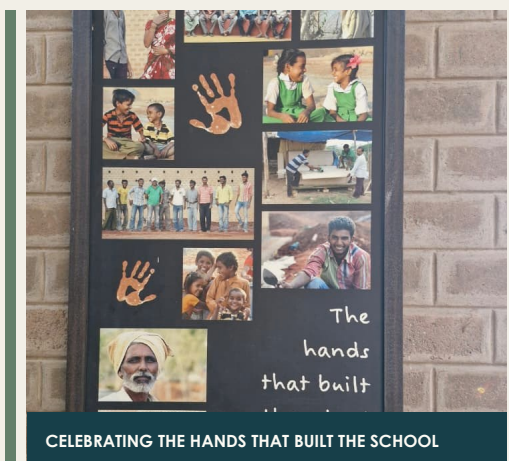
Rain is not merely a weather condition for a learner. It is wet socks, running without purpose, the smell of soil, shouting because everyone else is shouting, looking up, slipping, laughing, feeling cold, being told to dry off, and returning to class with the body still carrying the experience. No textbook explanation of monsoon, water cycle, or seasons can replace the memory of having been allowed to meet rain with the body.

This is not an argument against structure. A school cannot operate as if every impulse must be followed. But there is a difference between structure that organises childhood and structure that removes the experiences through which childhood is known. Schools make many practical decisions every day. The question is whether all practical decisions slowly begin to favour adult convenience over the learner's lived experience.

At Yellow Train, I also noticed how the campus carried local conditions rather than denying them. The first primary school building sat lower to the ground, making the interiors cooler and more intimate in the summer. Large windows brought in light and air. The boundary between inside and outside did not feel as rigid as it often does in school buildings. Learners were not sealed away from weather, animals, trees, seasons, and landscape. They were growing inside a place that made the outside world part of daily life.

This has implications for learning. Geography can be experienced before it is studied. A learner can understand slope by seeing where water gathers and where it runs. Environmental science can begin with what grows, dries, flowers, attracts insects, sheds leaves, or changes with heat. Botany can begin before a labelled diagram. A learner who watches a tree change across seasons has a different starting point from a learner who meets the tree only as a chapter. The real world gives learners duration, variation, and context. School spaces can either keep that world available or remove it in the name of efficiency.

This becomes even more important when childhood outside school is changing. Many children now encounter the world through compressed images. Seeds become trees in seconds. Buildings rise through time-lapse videos. Journeys reduce into reels. Sunsets can be skipped, replayed, filtered, and replaced. Screens are not the subject of this essay, and they deserve a fuller discussion later, but they do affect how learners experience time. A school campus that changes slowly, gathers stories, and allows learners to return to the same places over years offers an experience that cannot be sped up.





The same idea appeared in the way Yellow Train involved parents and community. The campus was not built only through institutional funding. I heard stories of parents supporting the school through interest-free loans, allowing it to grow without aggressive expansion or institutional pressure. Their children's names were etched into a tree mural in the high school building. The recognition existed, but it was folded into the school rather than turned into spectacle. There was also the idea of Yellow Train Village, where parents could volunteer to lead hikes, heritage walks, nature explorations, storytelling sessions, or other experiences based on their own interests and capacities.

This kind of community life changes the meaning of infrastructure. A campus is not only walls, pathways, classrooms, farms, and libraries. It is also the relationships through which those spaces are used. If parents are only customers, the school space belongs to the institution. If parents are participants, the school space begins to hold a wider set of relationships. If support staff, educators, learners, management, and families all have some relationship with the space, then the school begins to move closer to the community that children often experience it to be.

The pandemic stories made this even clearer. Santhya spoke about how malls and restaurants reopened while learners remained away from school, cut off from friends, teachers, routines, and play. The school first considered a silent protest, but then asked learners to write letters about what they missed most. Learners who may have otherwise found letter-writing tedious responded with sincerity. Their letters reminded adults that school is not only a site of instruction. It is also friendship, movement, routine, recognition, and belonging.

The school's response included a library on wheels and small "secret schools" in neighbourhoods, where clusters of children met teachers for short in-person sessions hosted in homes or offices with parental consent. These decisions were not taken casually. They involved conversations with teachers, parents, pediatricians, and mental health professionals. The school had to hold both safety and connection. Even when the physical campus was not available in the usual way, the school tried to recreate some of the relationships and rhythms that make a school meaningful to learners.



So the idea of space becomes larger than architecture. A school space is not valuable only because it is beautiful or unusual. It is valuable when it supports the relationships, memories, responsibilities, freedoms, and forms of attention that learners need. Sometimes that is a library. Sometimes it is a tree. Sometimes a farm. Sometimes a bogie. Sometimes a corridor. Sometimes a home temporarily becoming a small learning space during a crisis. The physical form may differ, but the question remains similar: does this space help learners feel that they are part of a living community?

Many schools may not have a campus like Yellow Train. They may not have farms, animals, large open spaces, a train bogie, or the resources to redesign buildings. The reflection does not depend on every school having a campus like Yellow Train. It asks each school to examine the relationship between space and childhood within its own limits.

Every school has some spaces learners pass through repeatedly. Every school has walls, corridors, classrooms, entrances, waiting areas, display boards, seating arrangements, storage areas, playgrounds or substitutes for playgrounds, and corners that are either ignored or used. Even small changes can alter the experience of a school. A display board that changes because learners are genuinely contributing to it feels different from one that carries the same faded material for years. A classroom where learners can sometimes rearrange furniture feels different from one where all bodies are fixed in advance. A library that allows lingering feels different from one that functions only as a scheduled period.

In *The Better School*, I have referred to this as communising spaces. A school that wants to become a community has to pay attention to how spaces are used, who feels ownership over them, and whether the infrastructure supports the values the school claims to hold. If a school says it values learner agency, where does the learner experience agency in the physical environment? If a school says it values collaboration, where do learners gather to work with one another? If a school says it values dignity of labour, how are the spaces of support staff treated? If a school says it values creativity, are learners surrounded only by finished work, or do they also see process, attempts, revisions, and unfinished thinking?

This does not require every school to become architecturally ambitious. It requires schools to notice what their spaces are already communicating. Fixed rows, locked rooms, staff-only areas, a principal's office, a playground timetable, a library policy, and the way learners are allowed or not allowed to sit on the floor all say something about bodies, hierarchy, discipline, comfort, access, and trust.

The school building, in this sense, is not separate from pedagogy. It is part of the learner's education. It shapes attention, movement, memory, relationship, responsibility, imagination, and belonging. It can make learners feel managed, or it can help them feel included. It can reduce the school day to movement between scheduled rooms, or it can allow learners to form a relationship with the place in which they are growing.

When I think back to Yellow Train, I do not think only of a beautiful campus. I think of the effort to align space with belief. A line in a small advertisement once said that this school was founded on love for children. Over time, that love seems to have been worked into pathways, stories, reading practices, parent relationships, animals, a bogie, rain, pandemic responses, and the everyday details through which learners experience their school. Not perfectly, because no school is perfect. But visibly enough to make one ask what our own school spaces are doing to learners over time.

If schools are nurturing human beings, and if adolescents need real spaces to practise responsibility, then the places learners inhabit every day cannot remain background. They are part of the learner's experience before we name them as infrastructure.

The school building is not separate from pedagogy. It is part of the learner's education.

05 WHAT CHILDREN NOTICE BEFORE THEY CREATE

On observation, wonder, science, mathematics, and the roots of creativity



ATTENTION COMES FIRST

“Before a child creates, the child notices.”

After spending time on the Yellow Train campus, I kept thinking about how easy it is for adults to confuse the presence of a rich environment with the experience of attention.

A school may have trees, gardens, laboratories, art rooms, libraries, animals, textured floors, open spaces, and beautiful materials. Children may pass through all of this every day. Yet passing through a place and learning to notice it are not the same thing. A child can walk past a tree for months and still see only “a tree”. Another child may stop long enough to notice how one branch grows differently, where the newer leaves are lighter, where the bark has cracked, where ants have made a path, or how the shadow changes by afternoon. The difference is not only in the object before the child. It is also in the way the child has been invited to look.

So I have been careful not to think of school spaces only as aesthetic and beautiful surroundings. The previous essay looked at the places children grow into, but spaces alone do not guarantee attention. A campus can offer many possibilities and still become background if the school day moves too quickly, if the adult is too hurried, or if every encounter with the world is immediately turned into an answer, a worksheet, a definition, or an assessed output.



PAINTING FROM MEMORY

At Sangam, this question became very real for me during Jody Lukas's botany session.

When I entered the session, I saw paper, paints, brushes, boards, and cups of water arranged at the back. My first response was simple excitement. I assumed we were about to begin an art activity, and some part of me was already happy at the thought of painting in the middle of what I had approached as a teacher conference. But Jody did not begin with the materials. She asked us to go outside. No notebooks. No bags. No water bottles. Just ourselves.

We walked towards three similar trees on the campus and spent time observing them. At first, I did what many of us have learnt to do in educational settings. I tried to understand the task. I wanted to know what I was supposed to look at, what the expected outcome was, and where the activity was going. I was not being asked to identify the tree, classify it, collect a leaf, sketch it accurately, or write notes. I was simply being asked to stay with it through attention.

Jody guided us slowly. She drew our attention to fresh leaves and ageing leaves, branching patterns, the thickness of stems, movement, direction, growth, and the different stages of the tree. Then the questions shifted. If you were this tree, what would your younger self look like? What would your present self look like? What would your future self become? Where are your roots? Where are your flowers? Where is your seed?

The questions were not asking us to abandon observation and become fanciful. They were asking us to observe in a way that allowed relationship. The tree was no longer an object outside us waiting to be studied. It became a living form through which we could imagine time, growth, and memory.

After spending time outside, we returned to the classroom without bringing leaves, photographs, flowers, or visual references with us. This mattered. We were not asked to reproduce the tree in front of us. We were asked to work from what had remained within us. Each of us had only three colours: blue, red, and yellow. Slowly, with Jody's guidance, we painted the background colours on the paper. Once the base was ready, everyone had the liberty to paint the tree from their memory, impression, and attention rather than replication.



WITH JODY LUKAS

When we later walked around the room, no two paintings looked alike. All of us had observed the same trees, and yet each painting carried a different memory of them. Someone had remembered movement. Someone had remembered shape. Someone had held colour differently. Someone had given more weight to roots. Someone else had brought out the upward reach of the branches. The experience did not create comparison in the usual way. I did not find myself asking who had painted better. I found myself asking what others had noticed that I had missed.

That question changed the way I understood creativity.

Schools often speak about creativity through output. We want children to make something original, solve problems differently, innovate, think outside the box, produce ideas, and express themselves. All of that may be valuable. But before a child creates, the child notices. Before originality, there is perception. Before expression, there is a relationship with what has been seen, heard, touched, felt, remembered, misunderstood, or wondered about.

If a school asks for creativity without allowing children to notice, it may only produce performances of creativity. Children learn to ask what the adult wants, what the assignment requires, what will be praised, what looks creative enough, what resembles the sample, what will receive marks, or what will avoid correction. The work may appear colourful, but the child's own seeing may remain underdeveloped.

This can become one of the losses inside the Learning Abyss. In The Better School, I have used the idea of the Learning Abyss to describe the losses that accumulate when learners move through school without building ownership, connection, application, or a meaningful relationship with knowledge. We often recognise this abyss when a learner has weak conceptual clarity or poor application skills. But there is another version of it. A child may pass through subjects year after year and never learn how to see through them.

Science becomes chapters. Mathematics becomes procedures. Geography becomes maps and terms. Botany becomes diagrams. Art becomes technique. Literature becomes answers. The subject is present, but the learner's relationship with the subject remains thin.

The botany session mattered to me because it did not begin by reducing the tree into content. It allowed the tree to be encountered. The content could come later. Vocabulary could come later. Classification could come later. Scientific precision could come later. The first act was attention.

I saw this same idea in another form through the science and mathematics sessions at Sangam.

Dr Hari spoke about biology with a seriousness that did not make the subject heavy. He spoke about awe, and about how science education should create moments in which children encounter the vastness and mystery of life. This is not the same as making science mystical or vague. It is about recognising that scientific temperament is not built only through information. It is built through curiosity, patience, observation, evidence, humility, and the willingness to remain with what one does not yet understand.

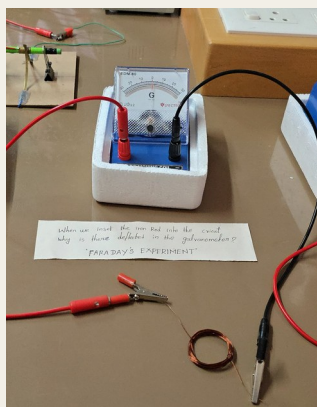
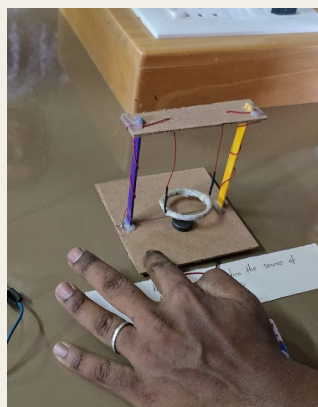
If facts are presented as finished things, children may learn to memorise them without experiencing the process through which knowledge becomes meaningful. The learner receives the conclusion but does not experience the search. In that arrangement, science can become strangely lifeless even when the content is about life, matter, energy, bodies, stars, plants, weather, cells, and the living world.

Prem Andrade's sessions approached this from another direction. What stood out was the ease with which he worked across physics, mathematics, biology, and chemistry. The boundaries between subjects did not seem to trouble him in the way they often trouble school timetables. He used a simple match-the-following exercise not to test memory, but to show echoes across disciplines. The same idea could appear in different forms. A pattern seen in one subject could help understand another. A concept did not have to remain trapped inside the period and the subject boundary within which it was taught.

He also spoke about allowing children to arrive at formulas through exploration, imagination, and visual understanding before giving them the formula. This changes the child's relationship with abstraction. A formula given too early can become something to memorise and apply. A formula that comes after experience can become a compressed expression of something the learner has already begun to understand.

Many schools unintentionally hurry children at this point. We want to save time by giving them the final form of knowledge. The definition, the formula, the method, the diagram, the rule, the expected answer. It feels efficient. It allows the syllabus to move forward. It makes assessment easier. But if the learner has not had enough experience before the conclusion is handed over, the knowledge may remain external. The child can use it when prompted, but may not feel that it belongs to their own thinking.

The mathematics sessions with Dr Suhas Saha and Nidhi Tyagi made this point in a way that was almost disarming because the room was filled with laughter. I entered with my own baggage around mathematics. Like many people, I carry a version of myself that is "not a maths person". These identities settle early. Sometimes they come from repeated difficulty, sometimes from comparison, sometimes from a teacher, sometimes from marks, and sometimes from the fear that mathematics will expose inability more quickly than other subjects.



PHYSICS EXPERIMENTS WITH DR SUHAS

The session did not begin by testing us. It began by making us curious. We played with numbers. We followed patterns. We encountered Kaprekar's constant, described with the delightful image of a black hole of numbers. We explored happy and unhappy numbers through repeated square-sum patterns. We watched logic become playful. Mathematics, for that time, did not feel like judgement. It felt like a place where one could follow a pattern and be surprised by where it led. If one session could make me believe that my relationship with mathematics could improve, then surely our methods can be adjusted more often than we assume.

That is a very different emotional entry point into a subject.

Children do not only learn subjects. They learn how they feel around subjects. They learn whether mathematics makes them anxious, whether science makes them curious, whether language makes them expressive, whether art makes them self-conscious, whether history feels like memory or burden, whether geography feels like maps or the world under their feet. Once these emotional relationships form, they can become hard to shift. A child who has learnt to fear mathematics is not only struggling with numbers. They may also be struggling with the identity that has formed around that struggle.

So the adult's responsibility is not only to deliver content clearly. Clarity is necessary, but not sufficient. The educator is also shaping the learner's approach to knowledge. Does the learner feel allowed to wonder? Does the learner feel safe enough to try? Does the learner experience precision as punishment or as care? Does the learner see error as information or humiliation? Does the learner feel that subjects are separate boxes, or different ways of understanding the same world?

The phrase "child-centred learning" is often used so casually that it can often lose its meaning. It does not mean the child decides everything or that rigour disappears. It means we pay attention to how the learner is encountering the subject. It means the educator does not only ask whether the chapter has been completed, but whether the learner's relationship with the idea has begun. Sometimes that relationship begins with a tree. Sometimes with a number trick. Sometimes with a falling object. Sometimes with a pattern across disciplines.

This does not reduce the importance of knowledge. It increases the responsibility with which knowledge is introduced. A learner who has been allowed to observe carefully may later classify more meaningfully. A learner who has played with patterns may later accept abstraction with less fear. A learner who has watched a concept develop may remember it differently from a learner who has only copied it. A learner who has seen that others notice differently may become less dependent on one correct way of seeing.

Visible output can be comforting. A completed worksheet, a correct answer, a full notebook, a marked test, a finished project, a neat model. These things reassure adults that learning has taken place. Observation, on the other hand, can look slow. Wonder can look unproductive. A learner staring at a tree may not look like a learner learning. A class laughing through number patterns may not look as serious as a class solving a set of problems in silence. An educator withholding a formula may seem inefficient when examinations are waiting.

The concern is understandable. Schools do have to prepare learners for assessments and future demands. But if every educational choice is made only from that anxiety, learners may keep producing outputs while losing their own relationship with thought. They may learn to answer without learning to see.

So the question is not only whether such experiences are beautiful or memorable. The question is what stops us from adapting this method more often. Is it the timetable, assessment pressure, teacher preparation, parental expectations, fear of losing control, or our own habit of treating the final answer as more important than the learner's route towards it?

Sangam gave me several reminders that education is not only about what learners know, but about how they come to know. The route matters. The emotional entry point matters. The pace matters. The body matters. The material matters. The adult's way of introducing the world matters. If we want learners to create, innovate, solve, interpret, and think independently, then we have to protect the earlier capacity to notice without immediately converting everything into performance.

A learner who notices learns that the world is not exhausted by the first answer. A learner who observes carefully learns that knowledge has layers. A classroom that allows different perceptions teaches learners that variation is not failure. A school that slows down enough for attention may be building something far more important than a beautiful painting or a correct solution. It may be building the learner's confidence in their own encounter with the world.

Children do not only learn subjects. They learn how they feel around subjects.

06

WHAT MESSY HANDS CAN TEACH

On material, repetition, skill, patience, and embodied learning



THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE HAND

“My hands had to learn what my mind was trying to understand.”



CLAY FIGURES AFTER THE WORKSHOP

I had not touched clay meaningfully in years before the workshop with Nandini.

That fact itself says something about adulthood. As children, we touch things all the time. We knead, press, tear, fold, collect, arrange, stack, mix, spill, rub, smear, build, break, and begin again. The world reaches us through the hand before it becomes something we can explain. Then, slowly, many of us become careful adults. We avoid mess. We protect our clothes. We prefer tools that do not leave residue. We become efficient with screens, keyboards, pens, phones, and documents, while the more tactile parts of learning move to the edges of our lives.

So when the clay stuck beneath my nails and left my hands messy, I noticed my own resistance immediately. It was not dramatic discomfort, but it was there. The clay was cool, damp, and demanding in a way that felt unfamiliar. It did not respond instantly. It needed pressure, water, patience, and repeated handling. I could not simply think my way through it. My hands had to learn what my mind was trying to understand.

That is when I began thinking about the intelligence of the hand.

Schools often treat learning as something that becomes more serious as it becomes more abstract. Younger children may be given movement, play, art, rhythm, clay, blocks, stories, colour, and song. As they grow older, the body is gradually asked to sit still for longer stretches. The hand writes, types, underlines, solves, draws diagrams, fills answers, and occasionally makes something for a project. Art and craft remain present in many schools, and learners often enjoy them, but their educational value is not always articulated with the same seriousness as academic subjects.

This does not usually come from disregard. Schools are under pressure. Time is limited. Assessments are clearer in some domains than others. It is easier to explain why mathematics, science, or language needs more hours than to explain what clay work is doing for the development of a child. If something cannot be measured easily, it can begin to look optional. If it does not directly support marks, it can be pushed aside when the timetable becomes crowded.

But handwork is not a decorative extra in education. It is one of the ways learners can experience effort, resistance, discipline, imagination, and the satisfaction of seeing something take form through their own doing.

Nandini's clay workshop helped me understand this with far more clarity than an abstract defence of art ever could.

She described how younger children are introduced to clay through the most fundamental form: the sphere. Before any elaborate object is made, the child learns to hold the clay, soften it with water, press it with the palm, and bring it into a rounded form. This may sound simple to an adult who only sees the outcome, but it asks many things of the child. Pressure has to be regulated. Too much water changes the material. Too little attention leaves cracks. The palm, fingers, wrist, arm, and body begin to work together.



For a young child, instruction at this stage cannot be only verbal. Nandini spoke about demonstrating through touch and movement, and when needed, gently placing her hands over a child's hands so the child can physically experience the movement. This is teaching through the body. The child does not first receive an explanation and then execute it. The child experiences the action, imitates, repeats, adjusts, and slowly internalises the rhythm of the work.

Over time, the sequence becomes familiar. Children know that work begins once the clay has reached the sphere stage. They know how many times they need to polish a surface. They know how to prepare the material before beginning. There is discipline here, but it is not discipline imposed as stiffness. It is discipline that grows from the demands of the material and the rhythm of the class.

As children become more confident, the forms become more complex. A dog may appear first. Then a human figure. Then the two may be connected through a leash or a gesture of affection. A relationship becomes a scene. A scene becomes a story. During Dussehra, children may attempt the challenge of balancing Ravana's ten heads on one body. Clothing, hairstyles, facial expressions, emotions, posture, and movement begin appearing in their work as the years pass.



ROBYN DAVIS TEACHES HOW TO USE SOFT PASTELS



WORKING WITH PIGMENTED SOFT PASTELS

This progression matters. Imagination does not float free from skill. A child may have many ideas, but the hand needs enough confidence to carry some of them into form. When the basic skill is still uncertain, the child's attention is occupied by "how do I do this?" Once the hand has practised enough, another question becomes possible: "what do I want to make?"

Technique, in this sense, becomes language.

We sometimes treat technique as the boring part before creativity begins. In reality, technique can be what makes expression possible. A child who has learnt how clay responds can begin to use clay more freely. A child who understands pressure, balance, joining, hollowing, smoothing, and form can begin to tell more complex stories through the material. Without that foundation, imagination may remain trapped inside the child's mind, unable to find a way out through the hand.

This is true across many art forms and crafts. A musician practises scales not because scales are the final purpose of music, but because the hand, ear, and body need a foundation from which expression can grow. A learner learning to draw lines, mix colour, fold paper, knit, carve, cut, stitch, or mould is not only producing objects. They are building a relationship between intention and execution.

The paper cutting workshop with Sven Saar showed me another quality of handwork: precision.



PARTICIPANT ARTWORK ON DISPLAY

At first, the activity appeared simple. Black chart paper, cutting mats, blades, and designs. Then one realises that every line matters. When cutting letters, the words first have to be written in mirror image so that they read correctly once cut and turned. Animal silhouettes require foresight. Quote-based designs require planning. The blade has to be handled carefully. A careless movement can change the paper permanently. During the cut-out sessions, fans were kept off even in Coimbatore summer because a small breeze could disturb delicate pieces of paper. Pen knives had to be capped immediately. Scraps had to be collected. Desks had to be cleaned.

No one seemed to experience these rules as control. They felt like care for the work, the material, and the people sharing the space.

Schools often forget this when they treat freedom and discipline as opposites. Artistic work is not chaos. It can require more discipline than many conventional classroom tasks because the discipline is visible in the hand. If I am careless with clay, the form collapses. If I am careless with a blade, the paper tears or someone may be hurt. If I do not clean the material properly, the next person is affected. If I rush, the work shows it. The consequences of attention or inattention are immediate.

Children learn community through this as well. They learn to wait, share tools, clean up, respect materials, make space for another person's work, and accept that the room is being held collectively. These are not moral lessons delivered through instruction. They are practised through the conditions of the work.

The soft pastel workshop with Robyn Davis brought yet another dimension of the hand into view. Soft pastels are messy, sensitive, and expressive. We were given paper taped onto boards, a coin, and a set of colours. The process began with emotion rather than object. We were asked to think of something that had been bothering us and assign it a colour. Using the edge of the coin, we scraped pastel dust onto the page and spread it with our fingers. Then we brought in another colour connected to a moment of pride or something that felt good within us. A third colour sat somewhere between the two.

There was no object to replicate. No still life. No expected form. No correct outcome. The hand was working with colour, pressure, touch, and feeling. Some people later spoke about what had come up for them. As adults, we had language to explain some of our choices. With children, the process would be different. They may not always have words for what they are carrying, but their hands may still know how to press harder, soften, erase, layer, spread, darken, or leave space.

Schools often give more confidence to children who can explain themselves verbally. Children are asked to write, answer, present, summarise, narrate, and justify. These are important capabilities. But not every child reaches language first. Some children think through movement, images, rhythm, texture, colour, shape, or spatial arrangement. Some children know something before they can say it. Some children may reveal far more through the way they handle material than through a direct question.

When schools provide serious hand-based work, they offer children more than an enjoyable break. They offer another route into self-expression, regulation, concentration, and understanding.

Clay can centre a restless child because the material requires pressure and repetition. Paper cutting can train steadiness and foresight. Soft pastels can allow feeling to move through colour without demanding immediate explanation. Geometry can connect hand, eye, tool, precision, and rhythm. Knitting, stitching, carpentry, gardening, cooking, and other forms of handwork can each build different kinds of patience and competence.

This does not mean every child will enjoy every material, and it does not mean handwork should be romanticised. Children may feel frustrated. Some may compare. Some may dislike mess. Some may struggle with fine motor coordination. Some may give up quickly if the form does not match the image in their mind. These reactions are part of the learning.

There is a particular kind of growth that happens when a child remains with a difficulty long enough to see improvement. A shape that collapsed begins to hold. A rough surface becomes smoother. A cut becomes cleaner. A line becomes steadier. A colour blend becomes more intentional. The child does not have to be told that practice matters. The hand experiences it.

This is very different from being praised only for talent. Talent can trap children early. A child who is told they are artistic may become afraid of making poor work. A child who is told they are not artistic may stop trying before the hand has had a chance to develop. Handwork, when taught with patience, can move the focus from identity to practice. The question becomes less “am I good at this?” and more “what happens if I return to it?”

In *The Better School*, I have argued that schools need to move beyond narrow academic measurement and pay attention to the wider capabilities learners develop over time. Handwork belongs within that wider view. It builds concentration, coordination, planning, resilience, sensory awareness, aesthetic judgement, respect for process, and the capacity to work with imperfection. It can also support learner agency because the child gradually experiences themselves as someone who can make, repair, adjust, and improve.

This has implications for school management as much as for educators. If handwork is treated as a filler period, it will be planned casually and interrupted easily. If it is treated as developmental work, then schools have to invest in materials, teacher preparation, age-appropriate progression, storage, safety, display, reflection, and time. They have to decide whether learners will only complete occasional craft activities or whether they will build skill over years. They have to communicate to parents why the work matters, especially when it does not produce immediate academic evidence.

Parents also have to examine what we notice in learner's work. Do we praise only what looks neat, impressive, or display-worthy? Do we compare one learner's painting, model, or clay form with another's? Do we ask what the learner was trying to do, where they struggled, what changed from the previous attempt, what they discovered about the material, or what they want to try next? The questions adults ask can either return the learner to performance or help them understand process.

One of the strongest memories I carried from the artistic workshops at Sangam was how completely people entered the work. Time did not become dramatic or mysterious. It simply became less noticeable. People looked up after long stretches and realised that they had been with the material for much longer than they had imagined. The experience felt steady and meditative, not because anyone announced it as such, but because attention had been given something real to stay with.

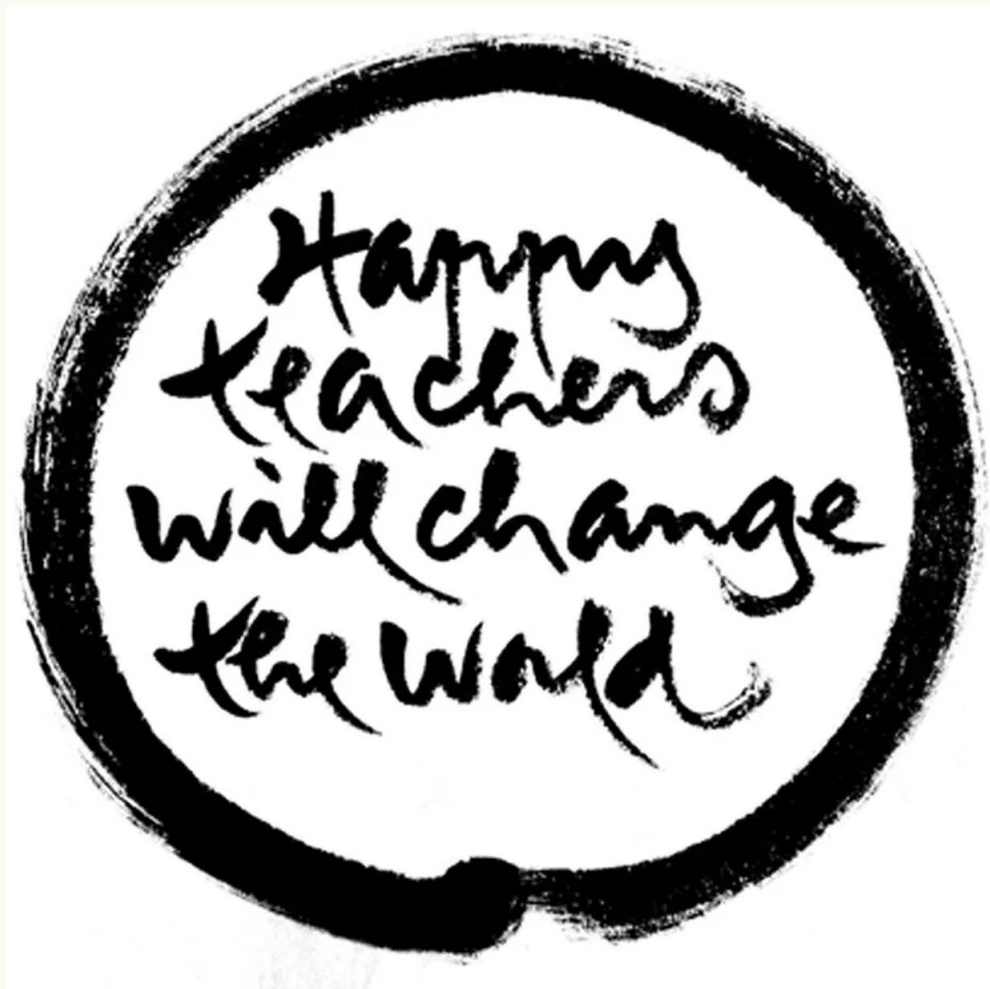
Handwork can open that kind of depth for children. It gives them an avenue to be with themselves and with their work without needing to explain everything immediately. A learner can see effort outside the body. They can hold it, turn it, look at it, show it, change it, keep it, or sometimes let it go. This experience of making is different from only submitting an answer. It gives form to persistence.

If schools want children to grow with patience, agency, resilience, and confidence in their own effort, what place are we giving to the hand, to material, and to the slow experience of making something carefully over time?

Technique becomes a language through which expression is possible.

07 THE TEACHER BEFORE THE LESSON

On teacher selfhood, feedback, and the inner work of teaching



THE TEACHER ENTERS FIRST

“Before any lesson begins, there is already a teacher in the room.”

Before any lesson begins, there is already a teacher in the room.

This sounds obvious, and perhaps that is why schools do not always pause over it. When a teacher joins a school, we speak to them about qualifications, training, subject expertise, classroom management, lesson planning, assessment, correction, parent communication, professional development, and expected outcomes. All of these are necessary. A teacher who does not know the subject, cannot prepare well, cannot manage a classroom, or cannot explain clearly will struggle to support learners. But the teacher who enters the classroom is never only a set of professional competencies.

The teacher brings a state of mind, a body, a history, a temperament, a relationship with authority, an experience of their own schooling, a way of responding to error, a way of receiving conflict, and a way of being seen by others. Some of this is visible. Much of it is not. Yet learners encounter it every day.



ALAN SWINDELL



This is why the question of the teacher's inner life came back to me repeatedly during Sangam, especially through Alan Swindell and Chitra's sessions. The point was not that a teacher must become spiritually perfect, emotionally calm at all times, or endlessly giving. That would be unfair, and it would place yet another burden on people who already carry a great deal. The point was more honest: teaching asks adults to know themselves well enough to understand what they are bringing into the room.

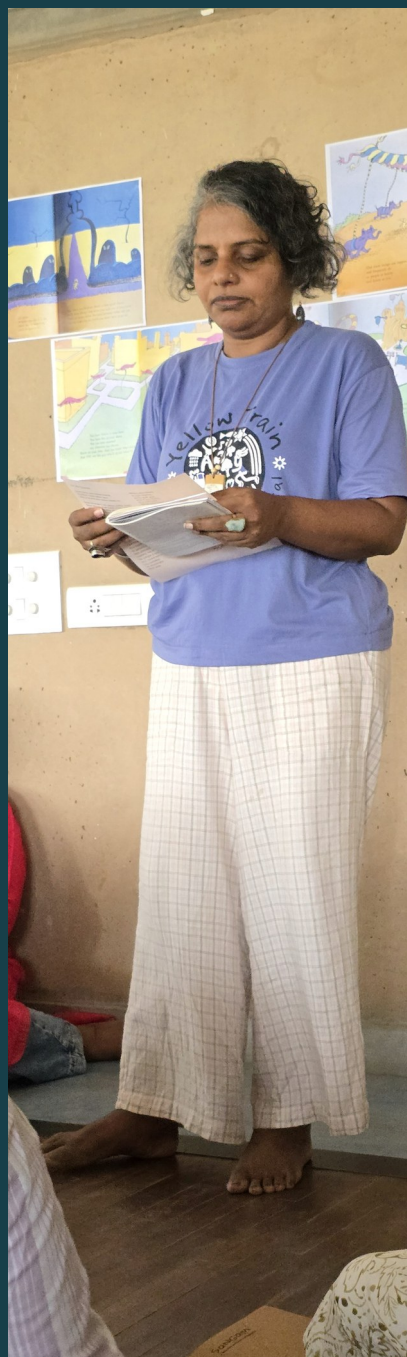
Alan spoke with warmth and humour about his own early years in a Steiner school. Beneath the humour was something many educators would recognise: the vulnerability of entering a school culture, trying to understand its language, its philosophy, its expectations, and one's own place inside it. Teachers are often expected to become confident quickly. They must stand before learners, answer questions, manage behaviour, communicate with parents, work with colleagues, and represent the school. Yet many teachers are also trying to understand who they are while doing justice to the role.

Alan used the image of the human cross figure to speak about this. The grounded legs represented our relationship with the earth: what teachers bring from their own life, culture, experiences, wounds, strengths, memories, and learning. The outstretched arms represented relationships with learners, colleagues, parents, and the larger school community. The image opened a useful question for teaching: what does the adult bring into the classroom as a gift, and what does the adult bring as baggage?

I find this question important because teaching is not neutral in the life of a learner. A teacher may enter with a lesson plan, but the learner receives more than the plan. The learner receives tone, pace, attention, irritation, delight, impatience, humour, doubt, confidence, and care. Learners notice whether the teacher enjoys being with them, whether mistakes make the teacher anxious, whether questions are welcome, whether fairness is practised, whether the adult is present, and whether the adult's words match their behaviour.

This does not mean teachers must arrive as complete or healed human beings before they can teach. Teachers are also living ordinary human lives. They may be tired, worried, overworked, insecure, grieving, ambitious, distracted, irritated, or uncertain. A teacher's inner work is not about perfection. It is about awareness. A teacher who has some relationship with their own inner life is more likely to notice when a response to a learner is about the learner, and when it is partly about themselves.

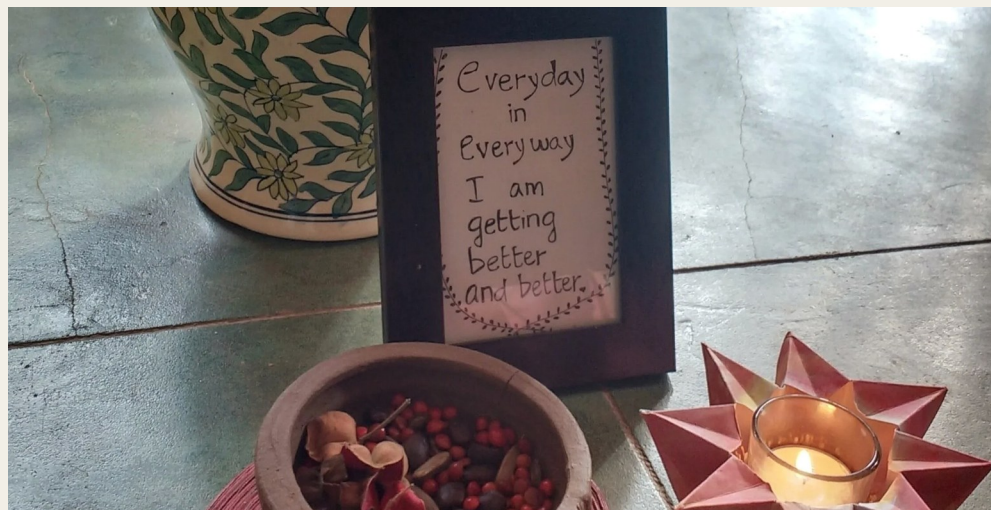
Learners can draw out many parts of adults. A learner who questions repeatedly may awaken one adult's curiosity and another adult's impatience. A learner who refuses to participate may be read as shy, arrogant, anxious, oppositional, or unwell depending on what the adult brings to that moment. A learner who excels may receive encouragement from one teacher and distance from another. A learner who struggles may invite patience in one classroom and labelling in another. The learner has not changed. The adult's reading of the learner has.



CHITRA

Chitra's session, Happy Teachers Can Change the World, took this question inward without making it sentimental. The phrase could easily become a cheerful slogan, but that is not how it was treated. Drawing from Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*, the session asked educators to look at who they are beyond qualifications and expected outcomes. What shaped them? What gives them energy? What do they believe learners are capable of? What kind of respect do they seek? What do they do when they do not feel respected? What do they carry from their own schooling? What helps them stay open?

These questions are not indulgent. They affect the classroom. A teacher who confuses respect with fear will build one kind of classroom. A teacher who understands respect as trust, clarity, and consistency will build another. A teacher who needs constant control may treat learner's independence as a threat. A teacher who is too eager to be liked may avoid necessary boundaries. A teacher who has never examined their own relationship with failure may respond harshly to a learner's mistakes. A teacher who is uncomfortable with silence may fill every pause before a learner has had time to think.



A REMINDER FOR TEACHERS



In many schools, this part of teaching is left to chance. The formal system deals with timetable, training, performance, workload, subject delivery, and communication. Inner preparedness is assumed to be personal. Some teachers develop it through experience, mentors, reflection, faith, therapy, friendship, reading, or years of living with the demands of school life. Others are never supported in that direction, even though they are expected to hold learners' intellectual, emotional, and social growth every day.

At Yellow Train, from what I saw and heard, this inner work is not treated as unrelated to teaching. Teachers and learners work with tools such as the Feeling Wheel to deepen emotional vocabulary beyond the usual happy, sad, or angry. The school draws from buddhist mindfulness practices associated with Thich Nhat Hanh and songs from the Plum Village. It also works with psychologists and mental health experts to help teachers understand patterns of communication and human behaviour.

The point is not that every school must use the same tools. Different schools will find different frameworks. What matters is the decision to treat emotional vocabulary, communication patterns, reflection, feedback, and self-understanding as part of education rather than as extras. If a school expects teachers to understand learners, it has to create avenues through which teachers can understand themselves.

Alan's phrase about teachers turning information into gold stayed with me for the same reason. Information is widely available now. Children can access facts, videos, explanations, summaries, tools, and artificial intelligence in ways earlier generations could not. If teaching is reduced to passing on information, the role of the teacher becomes fragile. But teaching has never been only that. A teacher helps information become an environment a learner can enter. The teacher connects it to life, paces it, questions it, gives it form, notices who is ready for it, and helps learners build a relationship with it.



That kind of teaching asks something of the teacher's own relationship with the material. The same poem, formula, experiment, story, historical moment, clay exercise, or mathematical pattern can feel very different depending on how the adult carries it. This is not theatrical performance. It is the difference between delivering a lesson and living with the subject enough to invite learners into it. Learners can sense when an adult has a real relationship with what they are teaching. They can also sense when the lesson is being delivered without much inner engagement.

In *The Better School*, I have written about educators as facilitators, mentors, guides, and role models. These words are familiar in education, and therefore easy to use without examining them. A facilitator is not only someone who allows activities. A mentor is not only someone who gives advice. A guide is not only someone who knows the path. A role model is not only someone whose behaviour appears correct in public. Each role asks the educator to keep learning about themselves because the educator's way of being becomes part of what the learner observes.

Feedback becomes important here. Chitra shared about how feedback was not described only as reporting or evaluation. Learners from Grade 4 onwards participate in conversations and reflections. When used well, feedback can become a mirror for the professional. It can show where a class is disconnected, where an instruction was unclear, where a learner is anxious, where the teacher's pattern is being repeated, and where improvement is possible.

This is very different from treating feedback as judgement. A professional who wants to grow needs feedback, but the environment around that feedback has to be thoughtful. If feedback is humiliating, it produces fear. If it is vague, it produces defensiveness. If it is used only for appraisal, it may not lead to reflection. But if feedback is held as part of a teacher's journey of self-growth, it can help the educator notice what they could not see alone.

This is perhaps one reason Waldorf education places such seriousness on the teacher's own development. One may not share every spiritual or philosophical practice within that tradition, but the educational insight is worth sitting with: the teacher is not outside the work of education. The teacher is part of it. Recognising one's biases, wounds, habits, fears, and preferences is only the beginning. The more demanding path is unlearning, adapting, receiving feedback, deepening one's practice, and continuing to become more available to the learner without losing oneself.

There is also a difficult truth here. If an educator has no interest in this kind of growth, schools can provide tools, training, and feedback, but the work may remain limited. Inner work cannot be forced in the same way a form can be filled or a lesson plan submitted. It needs willingness. A school can invite it, support it, normalise it, and protect time for it. It can make it clear that teaching is not only a technical role. But the educator has to participate in that journey.

When a school takes this seriously, it does not make teaching heavier. It makes teaching more honest. It tells educators that their wellbeing, self-understanding, and professional growth are not private luxuries. They are connected to the quality of the learner's experience. It also tells schools that teachers cannot be expected to do this alone. Inner work needs outer support: mentors, reflective spaces, respectful feedback, time to prepare, space to read, colleagues to think with, and leadership that understands that the life of the teacher enters the life of the classroom.

So when we ask what a teacher brings before the lesson begins, we are not asking for perfection. We are asking whether schools recognise teaching as work that involves the whole adult. What would change if the teacher's inner work was treated as part of the work of teaching, not as something left to chance?

Learners can sense when an adult has a real relationship with what they are teaching.

08 THE SCHOOLS TEACHERS DESERVE

On educator support, invisible labour, and schools that can sustain care



CARE REQUIRES CONDITIONS

“Care requires conditions. It cannot be sustained only through individual goodwill.”

There is a point at which asking teachers to care more becomes unfair if the school does not also ask what is being asked of them.

Education speaks easily about care. Teachers are expected to notice learner’s needs, respond to differences, build relationships, create safety, make learning meaningful, communicate with parents, work with colleagues, complete syllabi, document progress, support events, manage conflict, and remain open to feedback. These expectations are not wrong in themselves. Learners do need attentive and responsible adults. Schools do need teachers who are prepared, thoughtful, and present.

But care requires conditions. It cannot be sustained only through individual goodwill.

Rukmini Iyer’s sessions at Sangam helped me stay with this question without reducing it to ordinary wellbeing language. Her sessions addressed peace, conflict management, and burnout within the educational landscape. What I appreciated was that these were not treated as separate topics. They were connected to the culture of the institution and to the everyday life of educators.



RUKMINI IYER



She began from a useful correction: peace does not mean absence of conflict or noise. A classroom may be silent and still not be peaceful. A staff room may be polite and still carry fear, resentment, competition, or fatigue. A school may have rules against conflict and still leave adults emotionally isolated. Peace has to include the capacity to meet discomfort, disagreement, emotion, uncertainty, and relationship without immediately moving into control, avoidance, or blame.

Children are not only learning from what adults teach. They are learning from the emotional life of the adults around them. They notice urgency, anxiety, inconsistency, hierarchy, and depletion. They notice whether adults speak to one another with respect. They notice whether conflict is handled or hidden. They notice whether a teacher is constantly on edge. They notice whether a school's language of care matches its treatment of people.

Rukmini asked participants to reflect on questions that many educators would recognise: when did I last feel depleted, where does my energy go, what drains me, what sustains me, and where am I continuing to feel responsible for something that is not mine to carry? The questions were simple, but they opened a larger issue. In schools, responsibility can spread unevenly. A reliable teacher could be given more work. A coordinator who handles conflict well becomes the person many turn to. An emotionally available leader becomes a container for several anxieties. Any committed educator begins filling institutional gaps because the learner before them needs support and the system has not yet provided it.

Over time, this can create a difficult moral trap. The educator who cares finds it hard to stop carrying what is not formally theirs because the cost of stopping may fall on learners, colleagues, or the school community. They keep responding, smoothing, remembering, repairing, following up, and anticipating. From outside, the school may look functional because someone is doing the extra work required to keep it so. Inside that person, depletion may be building.

If schools are built on care, then care has to be organised.

Burnout, in this frame, is not only overwork. It is also a nervous-system and relational reality. Teachers can move through many internal states in one day: regulated, alert, heightened, depleted. A learner refuses to cooperate. A parent sends a sharp message. A colleague does not follow through. A class is noisy. A senior asks for urgent documentation. A learner breaks down. A meeting runs late. The teacher still has to enter the next classroom and be present again.

On the surface, it appears that educator is skilled at functioning well despite their nervous system in an activated state. They continue teaching, smiling, managing, answering, and solving. Schools may reward this because the work keeps getting done. But this surface level assessment may not reflect wellbeing. If heightened activation becomes normal, exhaustion may later appear as irritability, withdrawal, cynicism, or loss of care. The educator may still be physically present in school while something essential becomes less available.

This is where schools need to be careful with the language of resilience. Resilience is valuable. Educators do need strength, adaptability, and the ability to continue through difficulty. But resilience can become convenient if it prevents the institution from examining what it is normalising. If the same people are repeatedly exhausted, if emotional work is unequally distributed, if boundaries are unclear, or if teachers are praised as they sacrifice themselves, then asking for more resilience does not solve the problem.

Sven's session on love is work connects here. To love consistently in education takes effort, discipline, patience, and perseverance. It requires adults to show up again and again. Because love and care are often expected to come naturally, the labour involved can become invisible. This is especially true in professions and roles associated with women's care work. When a system assumes that caring people will simply keep giving, it can benefit from their goodness without adequately supporting it.

Schools often depend on forms of care that do not appear in official workload calculations. A teacher notices that a child has not eaten. Another remembers that a learner has been unusually quiet. Someone follows up after hours because a learner is anxious. Someone mediates a friendship conflict during lunch. Someone stays back for rehearsal. Someone absorbs a parent's panic before it reaches their child. Someone remembers a fear, an allergy, a family history, a tension, or an earlier conversation that helps the school respond more humanely.

These acts are part of what makes a school feel human. Such care should not disappear. But schools need to recognise the labour behind it instead of depending on it silently.



FACILITATORS AT SANGAM



The Better School rests on the idea that schools are ecosystems. If that is true, educator wellbeing cannot be treated as an individual add-on. It is part of the health of the ecosystem. A depleted educator affects the learner. An exhausted staff room affects innovation. A management culture that does not listen affects classroom life. Parent-school mistrust affects the child. The condition of adults becomes part of the learning environment, whether schools name it or not.

Holding educators, then, is not only about wellness workshops, though good workshops may help. It is about the ordinary design of school life. Do teachers have time to prepare, or are they always catching up? Are meetings purposeful, or do they consume the time teachers need for thinking? Is feedback given with care, or does it create fear? Are boundaries around communication respected? Are responsibilities distributed transparently? Do new teachers have mentors? Do coordinators have support? Does school leadership listen before deciding? Are educators able to say that something is not working without being treated as negative?

Rukmini's framework around boundaries is useful here. She drew 4 boxes labelled: time, task, territory, and role, and explained that in most professional lives, these 4 boxes are interconnected. Teachers often lose energy not only because they work hard, but because the edges of their tasks are unclear. Time expands, tasks multiply, territory becomes blurred, and roles become elastic. Some flexibility is inevitable in schools. Requirements of learners and school life do not always fit neatly into job descriptions. But when flexibility becomes the permanent expectation, it can become unfair even when no one intends harm.

As we explored solutions through the session, I found the idea of micro-rests quite useful. Considering busy schedules around school life, the solution needed quick and effective. The idea was to chart 5-7 minutes of rest in the middle of a typical workday. This could be something as small as noticing your breath, pausing before the next class, drinking water without rushing, sitting for a minute after an intense interaction, stepping outside, listening to music, naming one's internal state, or recognising that the body is already in heightened activation.



This needs care. Micro-rest cannot become the only solution or just another responsibility placed on teachers. If you are burnt out, breathe better. If you are overwhelmed, regulate yourself. If you are exhausted, manage your energy. That is not the point. Personal awareness matters, but it cannot replace institutional care. Schools have to hold both: the educator's capacity to notice their own state, and the institution's responsibility to create conditions in which that state is not constantly pushed towards depletion.

The same applies to conflict. Rukmini's work on where conflict begins reminded me that many external conflicts have internal roots. Fear, fatigue, threat, insecurity, shame, and the need for control can shape how adults respond. A teacher may snap at a learner because the teacher is already overloaded. A parent may become sharp because they are anxious. A school leader may tighten control because they feel pressure. A colleague may resist change because they feel unseen or unsafe.

Schools do not need to turn every conflict into therapy. But they do need better ways for adults to name needs, feelings, boundaries, roles, and responsibilities. Another perspective shift that schools can keep in mind is the tracing the need. For most of us, our actions and thoughts often stem from our feelings. Subsequently, our feelings may mask or reflect a specific need within us. The need to be validated, to be loved, to be respected, to be equitable. The simple movement from thought to feeling to need can help adults pause before reacting. What am I thinking? What made me feel this way? Why do I need to feel this way? These questions do not solve every problem, but they can provide effective cues for schools to regulate and manage conflicts.

The solutions shared here are merely a starting point. A school can begin with small and serious commitments: clearer role boundaries, better mentoring for new teachers, purposeful meetings, fairer distribution of invisible work, respectful feedback, scheduled reflection, and leadership that notices the emotional cost of school life. These are not grand interventions. They are ways of saying that the people who care for children also need conditions in which their care can remain alive.

For educators, there is also a responsibility, but it should be named gently. Educators need space to notice their own patterns. Where do I over-carry? Where do I avoid? Where do I become controlling? Where do I need to feel indispensable? Where do I keep saying yes and later feel unseen? Where do I need support, and where do I need to stop silently compensating for a process that should be improved?

This brings me back to the same sentiment shared earlier: love is work. If schools are built on care, then care has to be organised. It has to be made sustainable. It has to have boundaries. It has to include the adults who are expected to provide it. Otherwise, care becomes dependent on the exhaustion of good people.

A school that holds educators does not remove difficulty from their work. Teaching will always involve emotional labour, uncertainty, and days that do not go well. But a school can decide whether that difficulty is carried alone or within a structure of support. It can decide whether teachers are praised only when they give more than they can sustain, or whether sustainability itself becomes part of professional responsibility. It can decide whether burnout is treated as a private weakness or as information about the ecosystem.

Who holds the educators? The answer will look different in every school. But the question has to be asked before love becomes another word placed on the shoulders of people who are already carrying too much.

Who holds the educators?

09 CHILDHOOD IN THE AGE OF SCREENS

On bodies, time, rhythm, and what childhood still needs



THE BODY IS PART OF LEARNING

“Play is the oxygen of the nervous system.”

Almost every conversation about children and screens eventually becomes too narrow.

We begin with screen time. How many hours? Which apps? Educational or non-educational? Supervised or unsupervised? Should children have their own devices? Should phones be banned in school? Should parents be stricter? These questions are not irrelevant. Boundaries matter. Content matters. Sleep matters. Safety matters. But after a point, the screen becomes the only object in the room, and we stop asking what childhood itself still needs.

At Sangam, Aarti Rajaratnam's sessions helped me think about this with more care. She did not speak about screen time as a behavioural problem or a moral concern. She placed it within a larger developmental picture. Before attention can be discussed as a school expectation, the child's body has to be considered. Before concentration can be demanded, rhythm, movement, sleep, food, safety, and connection have to be part of the conversation.



AARTI RAJARATNAM



Aarti spoke about child development as unfolding through layers. At the base are bodily needs like hunger, thirst, sleep, and the body's basic rhythms and regulation. Above these sit the sensory systems: smell, taste, touch, hearing, and sight. Movement and muscle memory come next, followed by connection with others, and only then the development of the cortex and higher-order cognition.

The sequence itself felt important because schools often begin at the opposite end. We begin with cognition. We ask children to listen, remember, solve, write, regulate themselves, and perform before asking whether the layers beneath these expectations are stable.

A child who has not slept well, eaten properly, moved enough, felt safe, or experienced connection is not entering the classroom as a mind waiting to receive instruction. They are entering as a body trying to regulate itself. The body is already part of the learning situation.

In *The Better School*, I have written about the learner's twelve-year journey as something much larger than academic progression. A school is not only preparing a learner for the next exam, the next grade, or the next institution. It is also shaping habits of attention, self-understanding, agency, social responsibility, and a relationship with the world. Screens enter this journey not as a separate modern problem, but as one of the forces shaping how children experience time, body, boredom, effort, and relationship.

Aarti repeatedly returned to the body first. In schools, movement is often treated as something that must be controlled before learning begins rather than something through which learning itself develops. Yet the body does not stop participating in learning simply because the child has become older.



BOTHMER GYMNASTICS

Throughout the sessions she guided us through what she called brain-reset activities: balancing on one leg while clapping, walking forwards and backwards on different parts of the foot, alternating movements, crossing the midline, and repeating actions with eyes open and closed. Some of these resembled the games children naturally invent for themselves.

At first glance, they seemed almost too simple to matter. Yet the point was not exercise for its own sake. She described how rhythm, repetition, balance, and coordinated movement strengthen integration between different parts of the brain and help regulate the nervous system. Even simple alternating clap patterns repeated in counts of two, four, six, and eight become neurological work. Repetition strengthens pathways. Rhythm creates predictability. Movement creates integration.

At Sangam, I found an unexpected extension of this idea through the Bothmer Gymnastics sessions. Developed within the Steiner Waldorf tradition, Bothmer approaches movement not simply as exercise or athletic training, but as a way of developing spatial awareness, balance, coordination, rhythm, and a relationship with others. Watching and participating in the sessions, I was struck by how movement was treated almost as a language. Participants moved through coordinated patterns involving clapping, counting, balancing, crossing the body's midline, passing sticks rhythmically, wrestling through shifts in balance, and synchronising movement with the rhythm of a group. The emphasis was rarely on speed, strength, or competition. Attention repeatedly returned to posture, grounding, timing, observation, and intention.

What stayed with me was the realisation that movement here was quietly doing many things at once. Children were not simply exercising their bodies. They were building coordination between counting and movement, rhythm and memory, self-awareness and social awareness, focus and play. In one sense, it echoed much of what Aarti was describing. The body was not being prepared for learning; the body itself was participating in learning. Attention was not being demanded after movement had ended. Attention was emerging through movement itself.



THE YELLOW TRAIN FARM



Many of these experiences once belonged naturally to ordinary childhood. Children jumped, skipped, balanced, chased, sang, shouted, invented rules, created nonsense rhymes, and learnt through the social and bodily rhythms of play. Aarti reframed these activities in neurological terms rather than sentimental ones. Games, songs, repetitive chants, and silly words in one's mother tongue are often dismissed as trivial childhood behaviour. Yet they help build memory, emotional regulation, language familiarity, rhythm, bonding, trust, and social connection.

Play was not presented as leisure after learning had finished. It was presented as developmental infrastructure. As she put it, play is the oxygen of the nervous system.

The concern, then, is not simply that children spend time looking at screens. The concern is that many children today may be losing some of these everyday opportunities altogether. Less free outdoor play. Less mixed-age neighbourhood play. More traffic. More safety concerns. More structured classes. More academic pressure. More indoor life. More adult-managed schedules. More entertainment arriving ready-made.

Screens are part of this picture, but they are not the whole picture.

Simply blaming screens is therefore insufficient. Screens often become the visible object onto which we place many worries that are also about time, space, family rhythms, urban life, school pressure, and adult convenience. A parent trying to cook dinner, finish work, travel, manage another child, or simply get through a difficult day may use a screen because the alternative is not always available. Shame does not help that parent, and it does not help the child either.

At the same time, screens do change experience in particular ways.

Aarti spoke about neurogenesis, the brain's ability to create new neurons, and synaptogenesis, the process through which connections form between them. Childhood is a period of extraordinary neural growth. Sensory experiences, movement, emotional bonding, language, social interaction, and repeated activity strengthen pathways in the brain. Repeated experiences reinforce these connections while unused pathways gradually weaken through pruning.



Her concern was that excessive screen exposure may sometimes replace the kinds of multisensory experiences through which these pathways develop. Watching movement is not always the same as moving. Watching relationships is not the same as participating in them. Watching nature is not the same as touching soil, hearing insects, smelling rain, noticing texture, waiting for growth, and experiencing change through the body itself.

Some of her strongest caution concerned very young children. She spoke about developmental discussions around what some practitioners refer to as virtual autism. It is not a formal medical diagnosis, but rather a term used to describe symptoms such as speech delays, social withdrawal, emotional dysregulation, reduced eye contact, and developmental delays associated with excessive screen exposure during early childhood.

The concern is not that screens cause autism. Rather, it is that highly stimulating but relatively passive digital environments may begin replacing opportunities for responsive interaction, movement, sensory engagement, and social attunement that young children require for healthy development.

Aarti spoke about how reels, rapid scrolling, and constant digital stimulation can disrupt a child's relationship with waiting, anticipation, silence, and reflection. Children need opportunities to daydream, imagine, feel nostalgia, sit with stillness, and move through moments that are not instantly rewarding.

Boredom is especially misunderstood. Adults often rush to remove it because boredom can become inconvenient. A bored child complains, interrupts, asks for a device, distracts siblings, or demands adult attention. But boredom can also become the space before imagination begins. A child with no ready-made entertainment may eventually invent a game, revisit a book, draw, build, look outside, speak to someone, complain for a while, and then discover something. Not every boredom is productive. But if children are never allowed to move through boredom, they may struggle to discover their own inner resources.

One of the most striking ideas from Aarti's sessions was that children absorb nervous systems before they absorb instructions. Adults often imagine that children are primarily listening to words. But children are also reading stress, attention, emotional rhythms, and presence. Before they absorb advice, they absorb the atmosphere around them. "What kind of book are you?" she asked us.

The question stayed because it shifted responsibility away from what adults tell children and toward what children experience in our presence. Technology can undoubtedly open possibilities. A child can speak to a grandparent far away, create digital art, collaborate, research, learn music, code, and access ideas beyond immediate surroundings. It would be dishonest to pretend that technology only takes away.

The educational question is whether these possibilities begin replacing developmental needs rather than sitting alongside them.

I am not worried that children will know technology. They must. I am more worried that they will know technology without knowing enough of themselves.

A child who has not learnt to listen to their body may not recognise when they are tired. A child who has not experienced enough free play may struggle to begin an activity without external stimulation. A child who has not practised waiting may experience every delay as intolerable. A child who has not developed emotional vocabulary may use distraction instead of naming discomfort.

None of this requires us to imagine a return to some earlier childhood. Children are growing into a world different from ours, and education has to prepare them honestly for that world. Schools cannot protect children from today's world, and they should not try to do so completely. Their responsibility is more specific: to protect the conditions through which children remain connected to their bodies, attention, relationships, imagination, and pace while they prepare for that world.

I am not worried that children will know technology. I am more worried that they will know technology without knowing enough of themselves.

YOUR SANDBOX AWAITS

Steiner's work has influenced schools, teacher communities, and educational conversations across the world. In India too, alternative schools, Waldorf-inspired spaces, and after-school learning programmes continue to grow, adapt, and find their own relationship with local culture, childhood, and community. Some work closely with Steiner's philosophy. Some draw from it alongside Indian educational traditions, contemporary research, and the lived realities of children today. What interests me is not only the growth of one approach, but the questions this growth continues to place before us.

Why are so many parents, educators, and school leaders still searching for something beyond the familiar model of schooling? What do they feel is missing? What are they trying to protect? What are they trying to recover? What are they trying to build?

These nine reflections began from Sangam, but I hope they do not remain there. You may be reading this as a parent, an educator, a student, a principal, a member of school management, a policymaker, a counsellor, a support staff member, or simply as someone who cares about childhood. These reflections may meet each reader differently. A parent may think about the anxiety they bring into school conversations. A teacher may think about the part of themselves that enters the classroom before the lesson does. A school leader may think about whether the institution supports the values it speaks about. A learner may recognise something about their own experience that adults have not yet heard clearly enough.

So the invitation is not to agree with everything here. It is to notice what has been stirred.

What role are you currently playing in a child's educational life? What did you agree with? What made you uncomfortable? Which part of your current environment would you like to change? Where are you waiting for someone else to begin? Where can you begin in a small way, without waiting for the whole system to change first?

A sandbox does not ask for certainty or perfect blueprints. It gives us room to observe, question, experiment, and imagine without pretending that an entire system can be rebuilt overnight.

A better school is rarely created only through adopting a new method, a new language, or a new philosophy. It is built when adults are willing to look honestly at the whole: at the child, the teacher, the parent, the community, and the everyday experiences that shape learning. If this collection is useful, I hope it becomes a place from which that conversation can continue, always returning to the lived experiences of learners and the adults around them.

The work of education is not only to prepare children for the world. It is also to ask what kind of world children are practising every day in school.

Children rarely enter a sandbox only once. They return to it. They come back with new ideas and changing imaginations. What they build today may not be what they build tomorrow. Something once taken apart may return in a different form. The value was never simply in reaching a finished structure. Perhaps these reflections can remain like that too.

We may not be able to change everything at once. But perhaps we can begin with one honest question, one better conversation, one small shift in how we see a learner, support a teacher, use a space, hold a boundary, or protect time for attention.

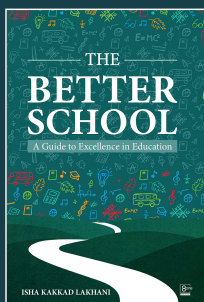
Your sandbox awaits. Whenever you are ready to return with new questions, new possibilities, and something you are willing to build differently.



ISHA REFLECTING DURING
THE CLOSING CEREMONY

The work of education is not only to prepare children for the world. It is also to ask what kind of world children are practising every day in school.

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