



Nikhil Sharma is a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant in the Visual Art Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur (U.P).

His doctoral thesis is about designing effective Art Education for Primary Classes. In Addition to his research, he focuses on Art History, Teaching pedagogies, Education policies, focusing on Primary art education in Indian contemporary scenarios. He also served as the student representative and organized various experts' various events, conferences, and talks. The researcher holds Junior Research Fellowship from UGC and A master's Degree in Visual Arts from Rajamaan Singh Music and Art University, Gwalior (M.P). Before coming to IIT, The Researcher has also served as Assistant Professor at ITM University, Gwalior and Image infotainment, Chennai.

A Contextual Study of 'Abhivyakti': An Alternative School

Nikhil Sharma

Abstract

Nation-wide uniformity in school curriculum poses a major challenge to a culturally divergent country like India. Alternative schools have appeared as one way to serve many of our children who have not been comfortable in the traditional public-school setting. In Alternative Schools, Special emphasis is given to the students' individuality without comparing them to their peers. Here the education is not limited to rote learning, but the students have gradual but comprehensive knowledge. The child's holistic development takes place by relegating competitions and grades in academic evaluation. For this purpose, primarily students with disabilities, majorly with emotional/behavioral vulnerabilities and learning disabilities, are included in the population of students educated in these settings. Researches that lead to pragmatic solutions are inadequate in Indian context. As a case study, this paper considers "Abhivyakti: An alternative school" located at the foothills of Himalaya in the state of Uttarakhand. The research attempts to address critical issues, and challenges for alternative educators and administrators are identified and discussed. Issues focus on governance and policies guiding the operation of alternative schools, the purpose of alternative schools, needs of the students and implications for service, conscription and instruction, maintaining high expectations and standards, and measuring outcomes and effectiveness. The paper aims at establishing the need for contextual study that describes, analyses and interprets the case from an ethnographic

perspective by following an observation and interview method to collect data and form a narrative.

Key Words: *Art education, Alternative School, Primary School education.*

Introduction:

There is a building in the centre of the village with similar rooms. All the children wear identical clothes, are expected to behave a certain way, and speak and express themselves only when permitted. They all sit in rows, wherein an adult comes and instructs and demands to hear the same answer from everyone. Think from a child's point of view and decide if this is the future we want to provide for our kids? Will this help them to live a successful life? Will it help them to maintain their individuality and confidence? Indeed, we can laugh at this system and consider it an outdated education model. However, so far, we have not created a viable alternative but imagine the education which is not bound under the four walls but free to explore in nature, where every child is unique and dealt with great care and compassion. The knowledge is not the synonym of heavy books but into the real-life experiences and in the lap of mother nature. The school is where the students learn and polish their critical thinking, observational skills, and learning instinct. Alternative schools provide such learning methods. For instance, if kids have a chapter in their book about Birds, unlike memorizing it, they would go in the woods and experience the different sounds and birds and bird watching. This not just provides them with an opportunity for experiential learning and brings them closer to life. This child-orientated education makes the students reluctant

to go back home even after the dispersal time prefer to stay at the Abhivyakti, an alternative school situated in the Avni Campus in the hills of Uttarakhand.

According to the encyclopedia of Children Health, An alternative school is an educational system designed to accommodate childrens' academic, moral, and medical needs that cannot be adequately addressed in a regular school environment. (Alternative school, 2001). Alternative schools like Abhivyakti have unlocked a new avenue for the students who are not comfortable in the mainstream setup of education. These schools are committed to assisting the children in discovering their talents, gifts, and interests at their own pace with the help of their teachers' parents, and friends. This method empowers these children to be proud of their village, neighbourhood, community, and the environment they live in. (Pathak, 2016). Therefore, alternative education systems began working on the holistic development of an individual by including arts, crafts, sports, and environment, among others, as part of the curriculum. There are various philosophies at work, but a common thread is that these are all child-centred. Unlike mainstream education, everything revolves around the child, mainly teacher-centred and inflexible syllabus and examination-oriented evolution methods.

Such a concept of Alternative schools is neither unique nor new to humankind. It ages back to the early Vedic period in India. It persisted and survived through all the significant events of history. It is even reflected in the education of many prominent religions like Buddhism and Jainism and later developed as the international community education center's like Vikramshila and Nalanda.

During the British Raj “Education in India under the British Government,” says author Kalpana–Pathak, “was first ignored, then violently and successfully opposed, then conducted on a system now universally admitted to be erroneous and finally placed on its present footing.” (Pathak, 2016) Later during the pre-independence era, some concerned social leaders came up with alternative schools like Mahatma Gandhi Rabindranath Tagore, J. Krishnamurti, Sister Nivedita, and Gijubhai Badheka etc. explored the idea of alternative education for those who were not satisfied with the mainstream education. Though they all have different philosophies of education, they all worked towards the holistic development of children, confidence, and teaching nationalist values. These schools laid the foundation of the modern alternative schools, wherein their style of studies and teaching is distinct from the run-of-the-mill schools. These schools have faith in the ideology to allow the child to follow their own pace while learning without the regimented structure of formal schooling. Children's overall growth is paid attention to, and teachers are not authority figures. Punishment is not part of the system, and students are not forced to study. Class sizes are deliberately kept small, and student-teacher ratios are healthy. Art and craft are paid as much attention as academics. Even though mainstream schooling has declined—from bad to worse—government schools are sometimes dysfunctional and the private sector increasingly commercialized. (Malhotra, 2007)

Over the past few decades, people have established different alternative schools; one of them is Abhivyakti School, established in 2011 as a child-friendly learning atmosphere at the Avani centre in Tripuradevi Uttarakhand in Kumaon Region. The school's vision is to deliver experiential learning for the children of Avani's

staff, weavers, and neighbouring families in and around Avani, thereby providing a child-friendly space. Abhivyakti is located in learning centres, educational programmers, and interventions. The alternative school includes many different aspects of philosophy, objectives, and practices. Often, there are traces of Gandhi's educational philosophy, Tagore, Freire, Montessori, Aurobindo, the Mother, Krishnamurti, etc. Like so many pieces in a puzzle, if we look at a number of these alternatives, we find an image of silver lining emerging out of the frenzied present. (Malhotra, 2007) This paper explores how alternative education can facilitate the child's knowledge, skills, and values and the challenges these education centres face. This kind of education, therefore, depends heavily on experiential learning.

Methodology:

The database has been mainly gathered through ethnographic research wherein the researcher stayed at the school campus for more than a month to analyze and understand the impact of education on kids. Along with the Ethnographic research, the researcher used the interview method to generate the data and document the classes on video. This study is based on the unbiased experience of the researcher and his interaction with the environment. During the data collection, the researcher relied on the question asked from the ward's parents and teachers, including the school principal. The researcher prepared a questionnaire mentioned at the end of this paper. This study takes an honest effort to showcase the impact of the environment and the kind of education involved in delving into alternatives to existing educational norms. Even though the study has been intensively done, it does not generalize the efforts of all the alternative schools elsewhere. This study leaves you to determine

how far they succeed in their efforts. As a disclaimer, this study is only specific to the "Abhivyakti: an Alternative school" it does not compare or say that alternative education is better than mainstream education. Thus the experiences can be subjective based on the experiences. Through this study, we will come to a better idea of alternative schools' ideas and why they always persisted, along with the challenges these centres' education face.

Case Study:



Abhivyakti signifies "self-expression," a quality that is intrinsic in all of us but often lost in the process of turning out to be adults. Children need space to learn and express their creativity in an environment that supports this inherent connection. (Abhivyakti-School, 2022). Abhivyakti School is the effort to provide this space. The school was founded as a primary school for children aged three to eleven. At the time of its commencement, the school had only five children. However, by November, the number increased to twenty in the same academic year. The pedagogy and learning methods adopted and encouraged at Abhivyakti were initially met with hesitation and apprehension in the local community. Placing paramount importance on creative and

experiential learning and pedagogies explicitly developed to cater to the unique needs of each child, today, Abhivyakti has a total enrolment of twenty students and functions from nursery to class five.



Image 1: Front view of Building 1 and 3

The School aspire to overcome the challenges and assure progressive education in the present set-up. Located in the remote area of Uttarakhand, This school provides education to the less privileged population. All other education systems glorify city life; this school fosters sustainable living values. Manifesting their dreams requires a passionate and determined team and sustainable economic and infrastructural resources. The traditional schooling system in the Indian context often emphasizes memorization and rote learning. Children perpetually find themselves under dominant pressure to perform and score well in the numerous standardised tests which begin right from the primary school level.

At Avani, it is their firm and sincere belief that creative learning and exploration in a structured manner is far more conducive to a child's growth and development than just rote learning. Here, they aspire to create a friendly and open environment for the students to express themselves creatively and with the utmost freedom.

Here, the children channel all their energy into 'learning by doing and experiential learning. Thus, activities and experiments are fundamental to our academic curriculum. The school make it a point to treat every student equally, with teachers primarily playing the role of a facilitator. They work on mental and academic development here, and moral, physical and creative development are gauged, supported and advanced.

Concept of Education:

The concept of Abhivyakti School is to treat every child individually, acknowledge and appreciate the uniqueness of the child. Since every child is unique, they all have other talents. Therefore, alternative education systems began working on the holistic development of an individual by including arts, crafts, sports, and environment, among others, as part of the curriculum. At Abhivyakti, they provide a platform where students can discover their talent by providing various opportunities in various mediums in the different fields of arts, sports, and education



Classrooms at Abhivyakti School

We also believe that each child is vastly different from the other and blessed with a unique potential, so they strive to bring out all of these facets by exposing the child to different teaching styles and activities designed for learning. Let us now dwell on the various aspects of this school.

(i) Meditation:

Apart from the teaching-learning activities, a unique feature of Abhivyakti school is the quiet time set aside for daily meditation. Coupled with some counselling, this has helped the children become more confident, participatory, aware and focused on their studies.

(ii) Child Centric Pedagogy:

Unlike the mainstream school, All the activities and education revolve around the child's interest. Most of the education is experiential and training activity-based. Teachers try their utmost effort to come up with impeccable planning. The I school principal takes daily meetings with the kids and the teachers, providing cohesive learning to each kid.

(iii) Art Connect:

During the initial years of Education, the child was to train in essential craft, allowing them to pursue it as an occupation after completing their course. Crafts to be taught include spinning and weaving, carpentry, agriculture, fruit and vegetable gardening, pottery, metalwork, basket-making, or any other art concerning the local and geographical conditions. As a part of this, the kitchen is also getting in construction, and the kiln was newly installed.



Students doing clay Modelling

(iv) Music:

The school has a collection of many musical instruments, through which elementary musical education is also provided based on the volunteers' visit. Music was to teach students beautiful songs. A child's natural sense of rhythm and time was introduced by beating with the hand. Group and choral singing were critical.



Students practicing musical instrument

(v) Campus Advantage:

Since the school is on the campus of Avani, a community built on sustainability and local empowerment principles, they get an advantage to learn the art of fabric making and give children the knowledge of weaving, embroidery, block-printing, dying of thread etc. Children also refine their motor skills and improve concentration power through these activities.



Nature walk on an event of Childrens' Day

(vi) No Competition:

The philosophy of this school has also been inspired by J. Krishnamurti that there is no competition when teaching, no

dominance, and learning is a simultaneous process in the present and where the educator and the educated both participate in the act of learning.

(vii) Nature Connect:

One of the advantages of this is the Location. Students are free to explore various activities to foster an appreciation of nature and sustainable living. The school also organizes trips and workshops to help them understand the importance of nature, herbs, and natural products.



Children are observing the sounds of tree

(viii) Self-Designed Curriculum:

Unlike the mainstem schools, which are always in constant pressure to complete the syllabus and most of their time spent taking exams and rote learning to the kids. Schools like Abhivyakti have an advantage over them. Since this school is only up to Grade five, They focus on experiential learning instead of mugging the kids. There is no competition; the teachers innovate creative, vibrate, and interactive ways to evaluate each child's progress. The other advantage is that this school has the authority to decide what is the best to introduce to kids according to their standard. Teachers customize their teaching aids to suit the interests and knowledge levels of the students. Teachers are also engaged in designing attractive books according to the intellectual of the students for various subjects.

(ix) Inculcating a sense of responsibility and duty:

The definition of education includes academics and arts and a daily routine of physical exercising, cooking activities in the kitchen, cleaning, sweeping, gardening, and various other activities on campus. Another program in Abhivyakti, which we thought was a drag, was to keep the school clean. Students had to do all the cleaning of classrooms daily; they always made sure to keep the class neat and organized at the same time. Every Saturday, they clean all the classrooms, playgrounds and everything around. That is how they learn cleaning and create psychological belongingness to the school day.



A young student cleaning the windows as a part of weekly cleaning drive

(x) Administration:

It is conducted in a democratic and somewhat flexible manner. With hierarchical structures being less and less prevalent, these schools experiment in rotating responsibilities, arriving at significant decisions through consensus, and taking collective ownership for the institution and what it stands for.

These are the points where Abhivyakti is still working and making a difference in many students' worlds. There are specific camps of people who consider constructive, while some are cautious and others are a pessimist. This idea of alternative schools like Abhivyakti is more popular among the progressive parents

working at the Avani campus or those who wish to provide their ward with the education with a difference. In order to deal with some of these, it is helpful to discuss brief challenges as they unfolded during the visit of the researcher

1) **No Exam System:**

One of the primary stigma attached to alternative schools is the exemption of exam patterns, which eventually creates an artificial bubble around the child; however, it is not the truth. The focus of Abhivyakti lies in fostering cooperation among the students. Though children are exempted from the formal exam, the teacher takes the continuous assessment. The child is only evaluated on their progress while consciously exempting them from competition among the other classmates. Children are accepted to learn at their own pace without interruption but motivated them whenever required. The evaluation is meant for the teacher to figure out where more effort is required. The teacher better understands the child where they can achieve the milestone. Consequently, the learning does not fade with time but remains long.

2) **Are alternative schools specific to differently-abled?**

The notion in the country is such that Alternative Schools are associated either with specially-abled students or slow learners. Those who find it hard to learn, write and read. Abhivyakti has not been spared from this image too. Since the inception of this school, the owners have been fighting against this stigma; however, when you see the list of alternative schools like 'The Rishi Valley School' or 'Ananda Wardha Niketan'. They are not just catering to specially-abled students. This place is a harbour for parents aware of the dark side of mainstream education and for the parents who want to provide a balanced life to their kids.

Alternative Education like Abhivyakti is meant for slow learners is also a misconception. The researcher spent a considerable amount of time with students and engaged in teaching. Based on his experience, he concludes that those students have unique learning times, but none are slow learners.

3) Shift From One Abhivyakti to the Mainstream School:

Multiple factors make the students leave the school, such as transferring their parents or getting a higher education. Through the interviews, it is revealed that the students who get shifted from Abhivyakti to another mainstream school must face many issues and take some time to get settled to it. Some students take only a few months while the others take more. The other school has a strict timetable and discipline, while Abhivyakti celebrates the uniqueness of the children. It takes a toll on students' mental and eventually reflects on their performance in studies. Therefore, each school should be taken on its own merits and see whether one's child will fit in there. It is different strokes for different folks when it comes to schools. Many alternative schools can be pretty different, even when they follow the same model as mainstream schools.

4) The Dearth of Competent Teacher

Finding competent teachers and a long-time commitment has always been a challenge for Abhivyakti because of the low funding and geographical location. Abhivyakti has been lucky to get some good teachers in the past, but it was hard to retain them. Another challenge is that teachers from mainstream schools find it hard to settle with them. Unlike the other schools, being an alternative school, it is more demanding in planning and constant

experimental learning with much patience. To attract the attention of more volunteers for teaching and contributing to society, the school can promote their requirements online on various platforms and send a pamphlet along with their Avni products.

5) **Expensive School?**

Such unconventional services come with misconceptions of being expensive in the mind of mass. Since this school provides an abundance of services, people often relate them to being expensive; however, the fees are pretty affordable. The fees have been decided by keeping the convenience of the weaker section in the plan. There is no provision for donations from parents. Most of their budget comes either from government or philanthropist organizations.

6) **Limited Budget and Recourses**

Abhivyakti still has lower student strength because the school does not charge higher fees from the students. If the strength of the students increases, the school will be bound to provide more resources for the students. The founder does not want to bring commercial touch due to manageability issues. Her vision lies in providing better education and exposure to kids with limited budgets and recourses.

7) **Financial Aid**

Finances have always been a struggle for the organization. Since the primary funding source is online or any philanthropist volunteers to donate for the welfare of society and children would be appreciated. The school is always searching for an organization that can fund such a school. They have also connected with a

proposal to many national and international NGOs. Since the parents of the students fall under the less privileged section, the school should find continued funding for smooth conduction.

8) **Less Pressure and Social Stigma**

The place where Abhivaykti is located is the remote place in the hills of Uttarakhand. Some of the students are first-generation learners. Their parents are still fascinated by mainstream education. At the same time, the idea of alternative education is to provide a flexible curriculum that also includes light bags and less homework at home. However, some parents seem apprehensive about this idea. They constantly ask to apply formal teaching methods contrary to the fundamentals of alternative education. To satisfy their desire, also they appoint home tutors. This is one of the significant explanations why Abhivaykti still has fewer students in their school as parents are not aware of the idea of Alternative Schooling. The school should organize frequent orientation and Parents Teacher Meetings to retain their Faith in it.

9) **Policy and Affiliation:**

Abhivaykti is affiliated with the state board of Uttarakhand, though it takes the liberty to design its curriculum based on the objective and eligibility of the class. However, this does not mean that such schools do not prepare their students for government-approved examinations to complete schooling and enter universities.

To empower such more schools that dare to get into experimental learning and their sole objective is not to earn money but the welfare of society. The Government must create some policies for their assistance. Such schools are assets for the community; we

must collectively share the responsibility to keep their existence alive.

10) Slow Development:

Since parents are already apprehensive about alternative schooling, they tend to compare their ward to counterpart students enrolled in any mainstream school, which is not justified and eventually creates more doubt in the mind of the parents. The truth about alternative schools is that, unlike mainstream schools, these schools provide slow but comprehensive education, which students take some time to absorb. If the parents do not have faith in such education, they will always compare it to the other systems and eventually lose hope.

It is difficult to see how such small schools like Abhivyakti work around the clock to make a difference. Consequently, there is a sense of urgency in currently considering alternative schools and helping them sustain the joint efforts of government and public organizations. In the absence of this, we will not be having more children getting to connect to nature and valuing their surrounding and natural resources, art and culture.

Conclusion:

Abhivyakti is a joyful place; what began as a small contribution to society has grown organically, over the years, into a more prominent institution. However, no education system is perfect and serve equal demands to everyone. Abhivyakti is also having its challenges but is committed to providing quality education despite all of this. It has an open campus with a few classrooms belies the necessity of heavy infrastructure like a music room, Kitchen, computer centre etc. No doubt, learning is going on here,

and enjoyably. The ingredients for this outcome are not the tangibles that contemporary society consistently emphasizes! As an effort that dissatisfied mainstream schools, the parents initiated. Abhivyakti is an eye-opener on what is genuinely essential for making a difference in the field of education: no vast buildings, no swimming pools to boast of. Just a few rooms with sustainable infrastructure and an open yard.

Moreover, a student who showed visitors around pointed out, 'Those are Oak trees, and we have a Himalayan Mountain Quail (Bird). Oh, and here is Golondrina. Indeed, such students will respect entirely different values and virtues from today's teenagers. More importantly, Abhivyati is evidence of the possibility of bringing about a change in the education system and doing it with children.

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