

“If Not Schooling, Then What?”: Learning Parks of Possibilities Shikshantar Learning Activists

*“If you don’t think schools and more ‘education’ are necessary, and if you believe they are part of the problem, then what do you propose? What’s **your** solution?”*

Time and again, in the two years of Shikshantar’s existence, this question has been posed to us. While discussing and analyzing the destructive nature of schooling,¹ and its insidious linkages to a cruel and dehumanizing model of Development, many people have agreed that serious crises have resulted from, and continue to exist because of, this kind of educational thought-control. However, either too deeply wedded to upholding (and benefiting from) the existing structure, or too mired in hopelessness and cynicism, the same people are not able to see any ways out. They react defensively or revert to finger-pointing, often bringing up excuses of time (“It will take too long”) or scale (“How is this going to apply to 300 million children?”) to avoid meaningful dialogue.

Though our criticisms of the System are crucial to transforming education, it is important to realize that they have not given way to cynicism. Indeed, equally crucial to Shikshantar has been our simultaneous affirmation, our hope and faith that people themselves (as individuals and as parts of various collectives) can conceptualize, articulate and actualize their learning interests and aspirations towards building a society more in sync with notions of *Swaraj*. This paper seeks to illustrate one example of various learning principles emerging from such a process.

A Word of Caution

Before proceeding, we want to extend a note of caution to the reader: The following should NOT be read as a Model to be replicated. Interpreting this experience as a Model undermines it for two reasons. First, integral to any goal of transforming the present day system of Education are processes of creating and using open spaces to ask questions, debate, dialogue, reflect, act, experience, etc. Models negate and destroy these spaces and opportunities for real learning, for they profess to have the answer before the questions are even asked. Second, the “one-size-fits-all” arrogance of Models (or Best Practices) hinders diversity and, in doing so, limits the number and kinds of learning opportunities available to us. Models confuse *equality* with ‘sameness’, and thus stampede over richer and more meaningful ideas of justice, relevance, context, creativity, and organic growth in the name of one Model for All.

Introduction/Background

The learning park of Fatehpura has its conceptual roots in the Udaipur as a Learning City (ULC) process-project. While details of the project have been discussed in the previous book,² the underlying principles of ULC can be summarized in two broad statements: a) It seeks to critique the current, dehumanizing model of Education and Development, as it exists in Udaipur and in Udaipur’s relation to surrounding villages and to larger State and Market forces; and b) It seeks to create and/or regenerate learning spaces and opportunities that support the development of each individual’s full human potential and the city’s collective capacities for meaningful, just, and ecologically balanced transformation.

Under the framework of ULC, Shahid Parvez, a local artist, volunteered one month of his time in October-November 1999, to nurture a creative and collaborative space for approximately 35 local children from different neighborhoods.³ The workshop challenged the ways in which schools stifle children’s creativity and full potential and destroy their self-esteem; it sought to demonstrate that, when offered a free, open and supportive space, these innately human elements can (and do) flower in inspiring ways. For the first time in many of their lives, children were continually asked by adults what it was they wanted to learn.

Following the workshop and a non-competitive art exhibition of the children’s creations, various members of the Shikshantar team met with the children, who expressed enthusiasm in expanding this unique learning process. The children said they had no other place to play or explore their interests. We asked them if they could possibly develop their own spaces for such activities. This sparked in them an intense interest to create spaces for themselves. In fact, during their school vacations, they eagerly came to Shikshantar three or four times a day to get us to engage in this project with them.

The Fatehpura ‘park’ is situated just next to a busy circle that has various shops, small businesses, and a bus stand. It is an enclosed triangle, surrounded on all sides by residential homes; shops for provisions, dairy products, and glass repair; a post-office and delivery service business; a private hospital; a local vegetable market. Approximately

12 children frequent the park: Pallav, Luv, Nitin, Lakhan, Ankit, Akshay, Udah, Gajendra, Purnima, Pankaj, Luvi, and Mukesh; their ages range from 5 to 13. The main co-learners from Shikshantar are Sumi and Ajay, though other members of the team also participate.

The Conceptual Shifts of a 'Learning Park'

Before describing the emerging principles of the 'learning park', it is important to engage in some conceptual clarification. 'Park' is written in quotations, for several reasons. First, it is not the proverbial green lawn, flowers, trees, swings, slides, etc. Although such an ambience does exist to a small degree, a 'learning park' extends far beyond this traditional notion.

Second, we use the term 'park' to contrast it with terms like, 'school', 'NFE center', 'community learning center'. Because these terms are associated with government or NGO projects, they are tied to a predetermined set of images, structures, roles, relationships, and expectations. These infiltrate everything from how these spaces should look and how they should be run, to who should be responsible for their functioning and what should be their outputs. Such terms therefore inherently limit and distort our ways of imagining new possibilities for the kinds of roles we can take on, the relationships we form, the processes we engage in, etc.

Third, instead of seeing it as a physical space, it would be better to think of a 'learning park' as organically-growing, diverse and contextual learning processes and relationships between young and old. This brings the learning park closer to the idea of a 'learning web' (Ilich 1970).⁴ Unlike schools which act as 'funnels', the goal of the park is not to concentrate knowledges and activities in one place, but rather to engage with processes and nurture relationships from everything around us. We expect the children will draw from the multitude of peoples and places around them, and ***the majority of meaningful learning interactions will happen outside of the physical space of the park.***

Growing the Process of a Learning Park: Emerging Principles

Emerging principles — interest-based learning, intrinsic motivation, multiple learning opportunities, redefined 'resources', diverse relationships, self-organizing processes — have taken shape according to context and understanding and are the foundation of the learning park web. These principles not only offer a concrete challenge to those ascribed in mainstream (and alternative) schooling and development, but they also illustrate how children can grow their own learning processes. ***Dialogue is central to all of the principles, and the resulting actions and relationships form the basis for urban regeneration.***

"Yeh hamari jahgay hein. Agar is mein bachhain nahin kalanghe tho iska fieda kya hain?"

(This is our space. If children don't play here, then what is the use of having it?)

— Pallav

Nurturing Interest-Based Learning

The first and foremost principle in the Fatehpura learning park is that children's interests and natural energy drive the learning process. In contrast to school, they freely choose what they want to do and are not bound by a predetermined curriculum and homework set. Also in contrast to school, they can freely express themselves and are never told to sit down and be quiet.⁵ As noted in literature on unschooling⁶ (Griffith 1998, Llewellyn 1997) and problem-based and project-based learning⁷ (Torp 1998, Steinberg 1997), having children's natural interests and energy serve as the base for learning produces fundamentally different processes and outcomes than what occurs in schools. Indeed, doing real things in the real world with real people prevents the segmentation of learning and living. (Aurobindo 1974). Such authentic situations ensure that the child goes beyond superficial memorization and rigid disciplines/subjects, and instead engages in deeper and more complex forms of understanding and nurtures a love of learning.

One of the first examples of interest-based learning was the development of the park itself. The entire impetus for claiming the space and re-creating it came from the children's own interests. The children staked out a piece of land in the midst of their neighborhood, which had been intended to be a park but was currently serving as a neighborhood dumping ground. Initially, the children said it was the government's job to clean up the space. After discussing the fact that it was not likely the government would come any time soon to clean it up, the children realized that they needed to take the initiative to make the space their own. While cleaning up together, we found waste from the local hospital (bottles, syringes), waste from the nearby vegetable vendors (old vegetables, jute

sacks), and waste from surrounding families (rags, papers, plastic bags). Finding so much garbage left by the educated members of the neighborhood (the hospital, their families) starkly challenged the commonly-held belief that the illiterate *subziwalas* (vegetable vendors) were responsible for littering the space.

After four days of intense efforts, the children then formally finalized their claim on the space. Each child wrote an essay on why s/he wanted permission to use the park. They then compiled the main points from these essays into a single letter, which they presented in an application to a member of the municipal government, to obtain permission from UIT (local government real estate planning authorities). Thus, throughout the entire process, the activities and motivation for 'making the park' grew out of the children's own interest in solving the problem they identified (i.e., not having their own space to play). Shikshantar team members supported them in pursuing their interest and learned alongside them. In the end, they were given permission by UIT authorities to use the space as they liked.

The interest-based approach to learning has also allowed children to follow and develop their own interests and share these with one another. For example, at home, Luv collected the remnants of matches and created a flower out of them. He then shared his product and process with the other children, and they are now thinking of collecting other waste products together, like rags from the tailor shop, to produce different kinds of crafts.

Learning also grows out of observations that the children make. For example, Pallav and Nitin came with us to an environmental art exhibition/competition organized by Astha (a local NGO). They did not like that all the children had produced the same kinds of drawings, and they felt that the questions of 'why the environment was being destroyed today' and 'why it was important to care for the environment' had not been represented in the artwork. Immediately upon returning from the exhibition, Pallav drew a large tree, showed its different uses, and wrote (from the tree), "*Agar mein nahin rehunga tho ap be nahin reh sakhte hain.*" ("If I don't live, then you will not be able to live.") He showed this drawing to the other children, which sparked a discussion about how factories and the Government have destroyed Fateh Sagar (one of Udaipur's lakes) and Moti Magri (a historical monument in Udaipur).

We have also seen that children do not worry about 'success' or 'failure', when they have the opportunity to think and develop their own interests. For example, making and using paper mache was its own adventure in trial and error. First, they did not put glue in their mixture of newspaper and water. When it did not stick, they thought about adding glue. Then, when they molded the paper mache to fit a bowl, they did not apply oil on it beforehand. So the shape disintegrated when they tried to remove it. Instead of becoming discouraged, they said, "*Koi bath nahin. Hum vapas karenge aur dubara nahin bhulenge*" (No problem. We will do it again, and next time, we will not forget). Unlike the fear, de-motivation and depression that occurs when one fails in school, the children actually seem to become more confident, more persistent and ambitious in their efforts, and more creative through the 'expectation failures'⁸ they have had.

Developing Intrinsic Motivation

The children have begun to see themselves as responsible for their own learning, able to discover their own interests and find ways to address and expand them. Thus, out of interest-based learning has grown intrinsic motivation. They are neither dependent on rewards or punishments, nor are they dependent on us for leadership or initiation. For example, on days when we do not participate in the learning park, the children nevertheless play together or try different projects. When developing the park space, they decided to make a swing out of the tubes of bicycle tires on their own. The children also organized festivities to celebrate Janmashatami and Navrathri (holiday festivals). It is important to note that the children have not become dependent on us for stimulation or leadership. In fact, knowing that schooling fosters dependency by controlling the entire climate of learning — from the content of the curriculum to the arrangement of seating — we also very consciously tried to prevent the formation of such a hierarchy or paralyzing relationship.

The other element of intrinsic motivation refers to use of immediate 'gratification' or 'stimulus' to urge action. Drawing upon research (Kohn 1993), we also recognize how schools use extrinsic motivators (marks, ranks, competitions, physical punishments) to further enhance a climate of control and indoctrination. Extrinsic motivators stifle free thinking and creativity, and cultivate anxiety and distress. The attention shifts from doing one's best towards gaining the prize (or avoiding the punishment) at hand. Therefore, while the children in the learning park are free to engage in games and activities, there are no rewards or punishments attached to their performances.⁹

The most challenging aspect of intrinsic motivation occurs when an argument or fighting breaks out among the children. As much as possible, we let the children work out the problem themselves. While often difficult, we realize that it is the only way to encourage the development of self-discipline and internal motivation. For example, many of the children of Fatehpura have recognized and appreciated the freedom they have in the park: to move, make choices, to fail, and to act (they readily contrast this to what exists in their schools). In the early days of the park, one child took this newfound freedom very liberally. Pallav was interrupting activities, threatening to ruin them, hitting other children, throwing stones. We did not rebuke him for his behavior, but asked him questions about what he did and why he did it. Through various conversations, and over time, he came to decisions about how he should act others. He is negotiating how to use his energy in constructive ways, in order to facilitate positive learning experiences, and is thus in the process of acquiring his own sense of self-discipline. Such a process would not occur had we punished him for his behavior, or enticed him to behave with special rewards.

Multiplicity of Learning Opportunities

Interest-based learning requires that multiple learning opportunities be available to children. Emerging from research on human learning is the profound recognition that no one institutional space or method can meet the diverse goals, talents, interests, and aspirations that exist within and among human beings. (Gardner 1999, Sternberg 1997). The wider their range of experiences — the more varied and diverse contexts a child has to learn in/from — the richer, deeper, and more meaningful his/her learning processes (Botkin 1979). Thus far, the learning opportunities have included: creating a park, playing new and non-competitive games, drawing, modeling clay, doing embroidery, using paper mache, making *rakhis*, celebrating festivals, dancing, singing, acting, visiting local lakes, temples, mountains, historical places, gardens.

However, opening the door to such freedom, diversity, and flexibility inevitably requires negotiation and compromise. Occasionally, the children found that their interests clashed. When such conflicts of interest happened a few times, the children decided to sit down and talk about what to do. They realized that everyone had different interests, but said that they did not want to do things separately (“*Hum joh be karenga, sath mein milkar karenga*” – Luv). So they came up with the solution to rotate these activities according to their different interests. So there would be outings once a week (for Lakhan), creating new things through waste (for Nitin, Pallav, Purnima), molding clay, paper mache, producing community media, and playing different games (for all). Rather than fight over separate interests, the children developed their own methods of adjustment and compromise to ensure that everyone could happily work and learn together.

Valuing Our Own ‘Resources’

For developing the park children often require particular materials. At first, they thought they needed money to buy these things. We have encouraged them to think beyond the ‘Market’ and see how else they can acquire what they need. Such ‘out-of-box’ thinking has led the children to two noteworthy understandings: First, the children believe that they can make things with their own hands and, as much as possible, have tried to do so. Second, they have gained faith in the willingness of local people to contribute to their learning processes by donating and sharing their materials, time, and energy. These feelings contest the attitudes that “we cannot do anything without a lot of money” or “first we should make a lot of money and then we will do something.” Rejecting this attitude means rejecting the dominance of the Market and creating spaces for regenerating the local (Mander 1996).

When it came to setting up the park, most of the children (and even a few of Shikshantar’s team members) felt that it was not possible to do it without money, because no one would give them anything. They were shocked when the shopkeepers and parents freely donated plants to them. Shopkeepers and parents have donated *chunna* (whitewash for the walls of the park), threads (for embroidery and making *rakhis*), and *multani mitti* (fine mud). These contributions have nurtured children’s faith that there are still people in the world who care about them and are supportive of their learning. They also help the children understand the importance of developing good relationships with one’s neighbors.

Similarly, children have learned to rely on their own resources. The children came up with the idea of making tree guards out of thorns. They borrowed a cart from the vegetable vendors, went together to the nearby lake to gather thorns, and returned to the park to make the tree guards themselves. Instead of buying toys, the children mixed *multani mitti* with glue and made clay for modeling different toys. They brought newspaper from their own houses to make paper mache. Painstakingly, they crushed red bricks to make *gheroo* (a powder) for painting a mural. The

children also made *rakhis* (special bracelets used in the special brother-sister ritual of *Rakshabandan*) instead of buying them. By understanding the depth of their own resources, the children have found that they are able to express themselves and pursue their interests in ways quite unlike what they find in school. They are also excited and willing to approach other people (for example, bicycle repairmen, puppeteers and artists) to learn from their resources and thus add new strands to their 'learning web'.

New and Diverse Relationships

Just as the children have developed new relationships with the people in their neighborhood, so have they found themselves coming together in new and diverse relationships. As the children of the vegetable vendors, the shopkeepers, government officials, etc. all play together, they are discovering that many of their preconceptions/stereotypes about each other are unraveling. They are building new relationships with each other by learning from and with each other. For example, when Pallav (a milk seller's son) tried to put down the talents, abilities, and confidence of Udah (a brass maker's son who does not go to school), Udah said, "*Mein school nahin jahtahoon, laikhan mein bahoth kuch kar sakhtah hoo. Tum sirf pardthaho aur likthaho. Tum aur kya karsuktaho?*" ("I don't go to school, but I can do a lot. All you can do is read or write; what else can you do?") Notably, the learning park offers a context from which to discuss Udah's ideas and experiences, instead of negating or dismissing him, as is often done in schools. Pallav, who originally was teasing Udah, found himself in agreement with Udah's assessment.

Interestingly, many of the children have been developing their understandings about relationships by themselves. For example, another child, Ankit, initially did not want to come to the park, because he felt he was above cleaning up the garbage (which all the children do for some time to maintain the space). The children, Sumi, and Ajay said that was fine; he did not have to come if he did not want to. We do not know exactly what changed, but without any word from us, Ankit came and started cleaning up with other children. Akshay faced a similar problem each time he came to the learning park, as his mother did not like him playing with the children of a lower class or touching garbage. Yet, because of his own interest in the park and the children, he negotiates with her and manages to come every day.

The open environment is also helping to mediate the rigid stereotypes that the children articulate about certain individuals or groups of people. For example, initially the children felt they had nothing to learn from the local vegetable vendors, claiming "*Yeh gaon kei hain. Hum inse kya seikh sakte hain?*" (These people are from the village. What can we possibly learn from them?) Later, during a walk to the lake, they spotted a *chowkidar* (guard). In the course of discussing their excitement about him, Ajay tried to make a comparison about work and asked them whether they preferred the *chowkidar* or the vegetable vendors. While Luv said he liked the *chowkidar* more (because he had a gun), Gajendra replied that he liked the vegetable vendors more, because "*Voh nokri nahin kurhte hain*" (They are not anyone's employees/servants). After interacting with the vendors on various projects, and after discussions about villages and agriculture, Pallav is now interested in taking everyone to his family's village to see how they live and to learn from them. These examples make it clear that respect afforded across class, caste and social groups is growing. The new dynamics among the children stands in contrast to the earlier feelings of superiority claimed by many of the children and offers a stark challenge to the alienation and social fragmentation that plague relationships in urban areas and in schools.

Self-Organizing Processes

The last — and perhaps most important — principle emerging from the learning park is that it is self-organizing. All of the activities, projects, relationships, roles, processes, etc., have grown organically from the children and the local context itself. We did not establish any preset plans or prepare any curriculums; we did not create any Minimum Levels of Learning yardsticks or set up a framework for 'performance-based' results. We wanted to get away from the mechanistic models of planning, rooted in classical behaviorism, that dominate Education and Development today. We also did not want to fall into the school/government/ NGO trap of slating a chain of activities, one after another, and then applauding ourselves for meeting peoples' demands and being 'participatory'.

Instead, we wanted to support and expand on the self-organizing processes that had begun with the development of the learning park. In line with research on self-organization, self-expression, and self-creation (Wheatley 1996), we believe that something can grow organically out of 'nothing', without any externally imposed planning or design. A network of relationships can emerge out of peoples' mutual interest and concern in a goal/agenda; their own understandings and beliefs then determine what the processes and the outcomes will be. For self-organization to

occur, we simply made sure that the door was open for diverse people to get involved in the learning park in different ways.

We also ensured that there were multiple opportunities to confront the obstacles to self-organization. That is, the principles emerging from the learning park directly challenged three aspects of parents' and children's rigid, urban, educated mentality: a) that schools (or similar institutions) are the only places where children can learn, b) that some expert must be 'in charge of' planning children's education, and c) that children cannot learn without trained teachers. Generating a self-organizing process means being open to continuous conversations and dialogues on critical questions about schooling, and also raising questions about our visions and paths of Development and Progress.

Challenges as Opportunities to Unlearn and Relearn

Along with the many exciting principles that have emerged from the learning park, we also find ourselves facing some serious issues. However, rather than thinking of these challenges as insurmountable problems, we prefer to look upon them as opportunities for more dialogue, creative thinking, relationship- and trust-building, and innovative action. Broadly, we can categorize these challenges into three areas: unlearning for the children, unlearning for parents and other adults, and unlearning for ourselves. By 'unlearning', we refer to the processes of internal and external dialogue, action and reflection that enable us to change our attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Unlearning for the Children

One significant challenge we see is that the children physically and verbally abuse each other. This occurs on two levels: sometimes it happens as a form of 'play' or 'teasing'; other times, it stems out of anger or personal tension. As they have learned through school, the media, and some of their family environments, violence and intimidation can be used to solve 'problems'.

In trying to address this issue, we discuss with the children how it feels to be teased, whether one likes it or not, what are different kinds of teasing, etc. To some degree, these dialogues have made a difference, but it seems more likely that building better relationships and rethinking the behavior within relationships will have a greater effect in the long run. That is, through various activities, children will increase the number of opportunities they have to learn together in collaborative, caring ways, which will give them spaces to explore the deeper concepts of trust, mutual respect, dignity, friendship, love, etc., with each other.

Fear is another considerable challenge. The threat of homework and the pressure of school breed fear in the children. For example, Nima and Ankita do not participate in the learning park anymore, because they each say they must complete their homework or their teachers will beat them. Pallav and Luv's mother demand that they study for two hours a day; otherwise they will not be allowed to go to the learning park. Fear – of either school officials or of family members – feeds upon itself, for like rewards, children see it as necessary to motivate them. But as documented in research on the brain, fear often hinders learning processes; the brain 'downshifts' and cannot function in fear-ridden environments (Caine 1994). We have noted that this fear has spilled over into other areas of life: children fear to take initiative, to talk with someone new, to try something they have never done before. To address this challenge, we try to nurture as open an environment as possible. Interest-based learning, freedom to experiment with new things, exploring new areas and developing safer relationships has helped to build a sense of self-confidence in the children and tackle this challenge of fear.

The feeling of competition also presents a great challenge. Even though the majority of activities the children do together are non-competitive – since we ourselves challenge this framework of competitive interactions – occasionally, the children want to play highly competitive games. They want to win in these games by any means possible, but it leads to jealousy, egoism, even fighting, and distorts the relationships among them. To counter competition, we continuously try to explore why the children 'like' these types of games. It seems that they have been taught to think that competition will let them demonstrate their own caliber or help them to develop a sense of self. We support activities where everyone can win but not at the expense of another child. We experiment with them to be creative and change the rules of highly competitive games, or at least, de-emphasize the competitive aspects of it. Or we encourage non-competitive activities. For example, while working with clay or making *rakhis*, every child was concentrating on his/her own efforts without comparison to another child. In fact, they tried to help each other to succeed, rather than putting each other down. We expect to continue to face the challenges of

competition in the future, but we feel confident that we will be able to take them as opportunities for collaboration and development of self-esteem.

Unlearning for Parents and Other Adults

Just as children face challenges of unlearning, so do their parents and other adults. Primarily, we think their unlearning falls under two main categories: the challenge of intergenerational learning and the challenge of generating a feeling of ‘community’ out of a random neighborhood. The two challenges are interdependent. That is, when local adults engage in intergenerational learning with the children, then a sense of ‘community’ can be fostered. At the same time, when children and adults participate in various neighborhood-level activities together, it opens the door to additional opportunities for intergenerational learning.

As we understand it, intergenerational learning grows out of the concept of co-learning, of sharing experiences and ideas with each other to understand and learn something together. To be able to participate in this process, adults must have an appreciation and respect for the abilities and intelligences of children (and vice versa). Unfortunately, so far, local adults have either been interested in watching the children do their activities or have wanted to give them a lecture and tell them what to do. On the other hand, there are rays of hope. Although the children organized the Janmashtami and Navrathri festivals on their own, the parents attended and participated (doing the *puja*, bringing cassette tapes, chatting amongst themselves, and even dancing). While not a deep form of intergenerational learning, it is nonetheless a start.

Aside from adults’ own preconceptions about their roles, vis-à-vis children, another challenge stems from the perceptions of the learning park itself. Many parents see the park as a ‘play’ space. Even worse, many parents are using the park as a ‘bribe’, as in “If you study and complete your homework, then you can go and play in the park.” Conditioned by narrow conceptions of studying and by the assumptions and frameworks of schooling, they have difficulty imagining that learning can take a variety of different shapes and can occur dynamically and deeply in other environments and spaces.

While a few of the parents’ attitudes about the park have changed,¹⁰ we have also had open conversations with those parents who persist in using the park as a bribe. We began by trying to explain it in terms they might relate to: that forcing children to study would not achieve the results they wanted, whereas allowing them free time to play and discover their potentials might make them more inclined to do their schoolwork as well. However, most parents were not convinced; they said, “*Ap kuch be ke sukhta ho. Pardai ke bina kuch nahin ho sakta hain.*” (“You can say anything, but without studying, nothing is possible.”) We then shifted strategies. Just as one would not equate ‘studying’ with ‘eating’ — as in “If you study, you can eat” — we urged them not to equate schooling with the learning park. The other common assumption is that children are only ‘playing’ and the park is a ‘playground’. Therefore, we have tried to have conversations with parents about the changes they have seen in their children and the different kinds of things they are learning. This approach has had a more positive effect on altering parents’ mindsets, but it is clear that continuous dialogues with parents, coupled with sharing in their children’s experiences, will be necessary to fully counter the depth of conditioning.

Finally, though we use the word ‘community’ to describe groupings of people, we realize that there is not a sense of ‘community’ in this neighborhood. It is a problem that afflicts most urban areas, when residences exist among shops, businesses, and small markets. Part of the lack of ‘community’ also comes from the fact that most of the families of the Fatehpura area have migrated from disparate places, so they do not know each other well; conversation is limited to basic greetings of “Hi, Hello.” Some parents have also had conflicts that impact their children’s relationships. For example, in the midst of a small argument between Purnima’s family and Pallav’s family, one day, Pallav started teasing Purnima and her little brother. This exploded into a big verbal argument between both families, the tension from which continues today and occasionally disrupts the learning process for all the children. Again, generating more dialogues with parents, developing relationships of trust and mutual understanding with and between them, and involving them in the conceptualization processes of the learning park are all ways we believe will improve intergenerational learning opportunities, address rigid mindsets, and create more supportive environments for community-building.

Unlearning for Us

The main challenge we face is shifting from ‘teaching’ to ‘facilitating’ to ‘co-learning’. *From the outset, we knew that we did not want to be their ‘teachers’.* Rather, we wanted to learn things with and from the children, their

parents, and the other members of the neighborhood. We remembered Vinobaji's sound scolding in *Thoughts on Education* (1956): "To be 'only a teacher' means to be: (1) completely ignorant of any kind of practical skill which might be useful in real life; (2) incapable of learning anything new and indifferent towards any kinds of craftsmanship; (3) conceited; (4) buried in books; and (5) lazy." It was a state that we definitely wanted to avoid.

We have been engaging in the challenge of unlearning our tendencies to teach, unlearning what was demonstrated to us through our own schooling. For us, it is 'un-teaching'. For example, we deliberately try to do things with the children that we do not have any prior knowledge of or experience with. This approach of exposing our own vulnerability greatly transforms the hierarchy that comes with power and knowledge. Whether it was preparing for the Janmashtami festival or removing thorns to make tree guards, the children led the process. We learned from them and alongside them.

We are also unlearning how to handle disputes. Occasionally, when the fighting among children has gotten to be too much, we have used a form of emotional blackmail, saying that we could not continue to come and learn with the children if they behaved like this. Clearly, this is not the best way to handle conflicts, and we are seeking other strategies for dealing with them. We either try to engage them in a dialogue around questions like "What happened? What did you do? How else can you handle this situation?" or we leave them to solve their disputes on their own. It takes time and patience, but we feel that in the long run, only methods like these will support the processes of self-discipline and conflict transformation that are essential for living and learning together.

We continue to explore the meaning of co-learning on a daily basis. Co-learning delves deep into our conceptualizations of children, of relationships, and of ourselves. It forces us to ask questions and reflect on our own stereotypes, methods of conflict transformation, intelligences, capacities, and full potential. In this way, we find ourselves continually discovering as much about ourselves, as we do about the children, the park, and learning as a process.

A Few Last Words...

The learning park in Fatehpura is one illustration, among many throughout the world, of how one can escape education and celebrate the richness of learning through pursuing one's interests and living in community with others (Prakash 1998). It shows us that there are certainly other paths we can take — ones that lead us away from schools and the culture of schooling, and take us towards confronting the challenges before us and discovering our own inherent human potential. The learning park is but one story, definitely not a type of Alternative School, and certainly not a Model. Rather, it is just one example of how changing the assumptions, processes, and relationships that dominate our ideas about Education can produce fundamentally different notions of living and learning. If we can all start to believe that there can be other options, and each of us has a role in creating these, then we are confident many more such spaces will emerge. We hope you will use this example to generate a dialogue about the 'learning parks' of possibilities that are open to each of us, if we only make an effort to see them.

Endnotes

¹ We must clarify between 'schools' as physical spaces and the 'culture of schooling', which encompasses an entire set of aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, relationships, goals, and processes. We welcome the idea of people of different ages coming together in a place to learn something together. However, schools today rarely provide an opportunity for this to happen in a meaningful way. Instead, they are dominated by a 'culture of schooling', in which labels, ranks, competitions, teaching hierarchies, disconnected and de-contextualized knowledge, stratification, and other forms of rote surface learning take precedence over developing full human potential, either individually or in collectives. Schooling also prioritizes Western models of Development, Governance, Industrialization, Consumerism, Science, etc.

² See Vidhi and Manav, "A Search for Meaning: Udaipur as a Learning City," in *Unfolding Learning Societies: Challenges and Opportunities*, *Vimukt Shiksha Special Issue*, Udaipur: Shikshantar, March 2000.

³ See Shilpa and Manav, "21st Century Artists", Udaipur: Shikshantar, November 1999.

⁴ A web draws upon many sources for its sustenance; it stretches its boundaries and is ever growing and building upon itself. In contrast, a funnel takes from all there exists and sucks it into one space.

⁵ In "The Art of Movement in Education," Rabindranath Tagore criticizes how, by restricting the body, schools have disconnected it from the mind. To fully express oneself, "every limb, and not just the muscles of the face,

should have a part of its own to play, and should know how to give to our inner sentiments their own perfection of expression” (105).

⁶ Emerging out of John Holt’s ‘Growing Without Schooling’ movement, unschooling is a movement in the United States and in other industrialized countries to remove children from the stifling confinement of schools. Children and parents instead rely on children’s own interests and curiosity to drive the learning process. Learning is not structured in any rigid form; rather learning is taken as living, and living as learning.

⁷ We use the term interest-based learning, instead of project- or problem-based learning, because we find it to be a more open and accurate reflection of where children actually derive their learning opportunities from. Not only are they escaping the structures tied to most problem- and project-based learning, but even when they are engaged in projects/problems, these too are rooted in their own interests, values, and perspectives.

⁸ Roger Schank, in Coloring Outside the Lines (2000), uses this term to describe how failing to meet one’s expectations (in non-threatening environments) is the impetus for deep learning processes.

⁹ Consciously fostering a competition-, reward-, and punishment-free environment was highlighted and discussed during the art workshop and exhibition that preceded the learning parks.

¹⁰ Interestingly, parents who have not gone to school are much more open to looking to and recognizing the park as a learning environment. We have had a much more difficult time evolving a deeper understanding of the park with those parents who have been schooled, who do not see any options but schooling.

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