

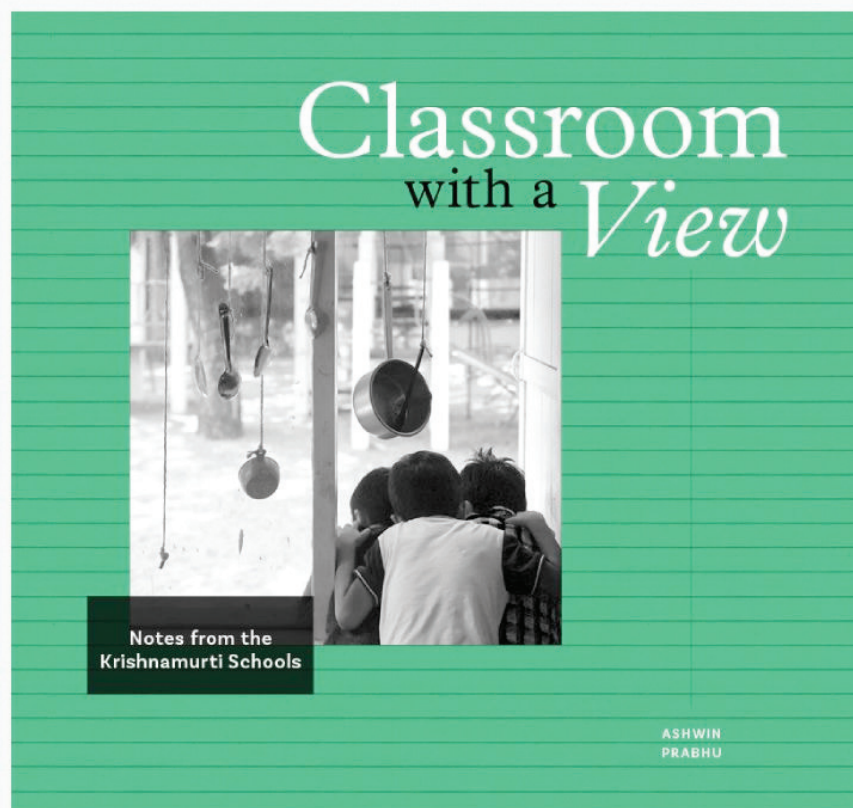
Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools |

Book Review

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Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools by Ashwin Prabhu is a visually attractive book. Elegantly designed, with an unconventional layout, infused with black and white pictures and J Krishnamurti's quotes on education as chapter breaks, the book immediately attracts your attention, beckoning you to pick it up. The text, written in simple language is likely to find a wide audience, particularly among teachers, parents and school administrators. The author of the book,

Ashwin Prabhu, made a shift from a corporate career to teaching in a Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) School, intrigued by the teachings of Krishnamurti and reflecting on his own schooling experience. Referring to himself as a *sutradhaar* (narrator), the book appears to be a tribute to what he has gained from the five years that he has spent teaching and understanding the philosophy that guides the KFI group of educational institutions and the practices that commensurate as a result.



Title: Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools
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Foregrounding the book in the question, '*What is school a place for*' the author takes us on a journey of describing these practices and the educational philosophy of Krishnamurti that guides them. Several anecdotes in the form of conversations between teachers and students, observations kept by teachers and the author's notes enliven the descriptions.

The publisher's note by V Geetha of Tara Books builds a case for wider application of the practices described in the book by reaching out to teachers in regular schools through workshops and conversations with alternative school networks. She attempts to allay the general impression about the KFI schools belonging to the elite-alternative category and their practices being impractical for adoption by regular schools. The widely acclaimed ideas of Krishnamurti on learning and education of children, such as freedom from fear, punishment and authority as being central to the learning of all children, irrespective of context, are highlighted in her note. Prabhu too makes a similar attempt at the end of each chapter.

The first chapter, titled 'Knowing Oneself', focuses on the importance of self-enquiry – the centrality of the idea in Krishnamurti's educational philosophy. Prabhu describes, in detail, *Astachal*, the practice of 'watching the sunset over the western hills' followed at the Rishi Valley School. Underlying this practice is the importance of quietude or stillness for both the children and teachers after an active workday. Experiencing silence together is indeed a beautiful exercise to help children focus and draw attention to their inner selves. Prabhu describes how younger children resist the practice at first but later through gentle persuasion and persistence, begin to value it. Other practices, such as circle time and culture classes are also described as contributing to the same purpose but through the medium of conversation and dialogue.

The second chapter in the book is devoted to the importance given in the KFI schools to the study of the environment – natural, physical and social. Prabhu describes the practice of *Area Study* – the learning methodology that is adopted for teaching social science subjects. Going beyond the prescribed textbooks, group projects are designed in a way that the senior students have an opportunity to study a geographical area in their vicinity over a period of time, through a multi-disciplinary lens, using the experiential approach.

Using the dichotomy of studying versus learning, the author segues into the next chapter where the emphasis is on solving real-world problems through discovery, creative thinking and multidisciplinary approaches. The idea of the 'Design Lab' is described with the example of how a question from a student in the classroom led to a project of making soap for in-house consumption. Prabhu concludes that such projects lead to learning that is both tangible as well as intangible, the intangible being valuable in terms of encouraging children to contribute to a common goal without the sense of competition. Teachers feel that such projects allow them to cater to the individual strengths and learning styles of children instilling values of cooperation and collaboration among them. This spirit of cooperation and experiential learning is extended into the next chapter, where learning through different art forms like folk dance and theatre are explained as vital tools for learning.

Krishnamurti said, '*One can learn about oneself only in the mirror of relationship*'. The book is infused with examples of practices based on this thought – the importance given to eating together, the engagement of the children in community work, and the dignity attached to manual labour (through the rota system), wherein all children are expected to participate in the washing of plates and keeping the dining area clean that all point to the importance associated with the values of building relationships, mutual respect and a feeling of community. Prabhu describes these practices as means of nurturing sensitivity in children.

The last chapter examines the widely pervasive notion of fear that manifests in different forms in children attending schools in India. As an illustration, the author uses the conventional examination system to point out how children experience fear and stress due to the larger-than-life image of exams and the impact this has on their learning experiences. At the KFI schools, achievement-related stress and fear are allayed by adopting practices that preclude rewards and punishment, and by keeping the everyday school environment non-competitive and free of comparison by adopting Mixed Age Grouping in organising classes and designing curricula.

As a reader, the book appeals to me in multiple ways. I enjoyed reading the rich, descriptive accounts of the practices with examples and conversations with children and teachers. Almost all the practices

described in the book appeal to and resonate with my own beliefs about the education of young children. Hence, at first glance, the book achieves the purpose of being a comprehensive collation of the translation of a philosophy of education into practice.

As an educator, however, I am left wanting more. The description of the pedagogical practices in the book is somewhat opaque. These are explained as interpretations stemming from Krishnamurti's educational philosophy, but the attempt to explain the rationale behind these seems a bit half-hearted, particularly to a reader who may not have such a deep insight into the educational philosophy these subscribe to. If the intention of the book (as claimed by the author and the publisher) is to showcase how these practices need not remain the bastion of the alternative school system and can be adopted by regular schools, then, the book falls short of meeting that objective.

I also feel that the author could have delved more deeply at the outset into the phenomenon of the alternative school system and, its history and relevance in the contemporary context of India. The book's appeal and potential lie in being able to convince the larger majority of us who belong to the mainstream to see the possibility of embracing these practices in the regular school system. However, to do that, it is important to first dispel the mysticism that surrounds the alternative school system and set the context within which these practices are located. Minakshi Thapan's *Life at School - An Ethnographic Study*, in that sense, is a much better exemplar of a deeper, subjective interpretation of Krishnamurti's philosophy as viewed by the teachers and students at the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh.

As a reader, I constantly struggled to form an image of a teacher in a KFI school. Considering the central role that she plays in executing the practices described in the book, somehow there is very little said about the teacher herself. Who is this person? What is the journey that a teacher goes through in embracing and internalising these educational ideals? What are some struggles, challenges and reservations that she experiences and overcomes as she goes along? What role does the institution play in supporting and scaffolding her learning and growth through this journey? I wish that a chapter was devoted to answering these questions. To me,

the teacher comes across almost as a prototype, a perfect, fully prepared superhuman who almost always knows what to do and how to deal with the difficult questions that the children ask every day at school.

In a similar vein, the book presents the children studying in the schools as being homogeneous in their thinking and in their ability to imbibe the values and learning intended from the practices. The author narrates a few anecdotes of children questioning the practices and how teachers use constant dialogue and reason as a means of allaying their concerns. But are there no instances when a precocious adolescent has resisted or questioned a practice, or parents have disagreed with the school's policies?

I wish the book had given us some glimpses of the challenges and failures faced in realising these educational ideals on an everyday basis and how therefore, the practices too, have undergone some modification and reinterpretation over the years. The somewhat monochromatic view of presenting the best practices almost in the form of success stories alone does not do justice to the academic potential that a book of this nature could have. A deeper, critical and more analytical view of these could have helped educators to use the book more meaningfully, as a means of assessing the application of the ideas in their own settings.

In conclusion, I think that the book scores very well in narrating in a fair amount of detail, the practices that have organically emerged from J Krishnamurti's extremely insightful educational philosophy that resonates with the progressive vision of school education for the country. Schools in India, irrespective of their affiliation and context, can gain from learning about this educational philosophy and its translation into the values and practices described in the book.

Enabling the school to become a place for children to come to without the fear of judgement and comparison, developing values of aesthetic appreciation, sensitising children to their community and using real-world problems to teach science and the social sciences, are all excellent examples of pedagogical leaps that we must take in order to bring about educational reforms in the country. While the book showcases this well, teachers and school heads should be careful in embracing the practices without developing a

deeper insight into the thought behind the ideas and the pitfalls and challenges that they may face. The readiness and preparedness of all stakeholders involved – teachers, parents, children and the community – is important as is a realistic assessment

of the available resources before implementation. Having said that, viewing education reforms on a continuum, as a journey to embark on, is important and there can never be an ideal time or level of readiness to get started.



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