Brief History of Multigrade-Multilevel Methodology Practiced at Rishi Valley and its Environs

1. Introduction

The aim of present note is to write a brief history of multigrade education as it was practiced in the fifties at Rishi Valley School and to trace the different stages of its evolution beyond Rishi Valley’s borders.

At a second level, the note aims to show how a group of three schools situated within less than thirty km of each other nourished a framework for a child-centred pedagogy and, how within this shared framework, dissimilar MGML structures arose.

At another, more implicit level, the note contains arguments in favour of developing a multigrade pedagogy for schools that are failing; surveys of schools in the Indian countryside point to large-scale failure rates due largely to the practise of a pedagogy based on monograde principles practised in schools the majority of which are multigrade.¹

To claim ownership of the methodology based on either priority or spread, is not the intention; it would indeed be absurd to do so. There are many ways of designing multigrade classroom instruction; the past eighty years have seen at least three experiments in multigrade or vertically grouped classrooms emerge in Rishi Valley and its environments. As Angela Little, an expert on multigrade education, points out, vertically-grouped classrooms are ‘as old as mankind’; monograde classrooms evolved in Europe over the last 400 years.² Education in India before the advent of the colonial schooling was multigrade: the teacher assigned work to each student according to the student’s level of learning.³ Monograde classes, however, are presently the order towards which government aspire despite the abysmal statistics about learning outcomes recorded by national surveys.

A Multigrade-Multilevel (MGML) teacher is one who, in a single classroom space, teaches children of different ages and varying abilities, who would normally belong to different grade levels. A multigrade classroom, also known as mixed age classroom or vertically grouped classroom, accommodates children of different ages with varied learning backgrounds.

Students in monograde classrooms on the other hand are horizontally grouped so that pupils of more or less the same age learn together. The pedagogy is based on the assumption that a numbered class, such as 7 or 8, roughly indicates a student’s actual or potential achievement level in subjects taught in that particular classroom – reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography and so on. Teachers generally teach from prescribed textbooks and students keep up

² Little, Angela *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching*. (Ed.) Dodrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006
with the time schedule set by teachers. Textbooks indicate both the expected standards a student will reach at the end of the academic year and the process whereby expected standards are reached.

2. First Steps

The philosopher J. Krishnamurti believed that his schools should aim to educate children to be self-reliant individuals, responsible for themselves, for each other and for the environment. He believed in the necessity of educating a child’s intellectual, aesthetic emotional, and moral sensibilities in an atmosphere free of fear. Children schooled in an atmosphere that promotes competition and comparison rather than cooperation, where reward and punishment are the only tools for motivation students grow up fearful and unable to contribute to a just social system. If children learn to cooperate rather than to compete not only will they flourish but will also create a good society.4

Rishi Valley School was established in 1931, deep in the interior of the Andhra Pradesh countryside. Its first head was an educator with a degree in mathematics from Cambridge University. There is evidence that he was influenced by Montessori and his classrooms structure cut across age groups. We do not know the exact structure of these classes nor whether the idea had roots in Subba Rao’s own early educational experience of traditional schools in India, which he himself would have attended, and which were largely headed by single teachers in multiple age and ability groupings.

F. Gordon Pearce, a Principal of the school in the fifties, has left a very clear record of the multigrade structure he put in place during the fifties in order to nurture the values articulated by Rishi Valley’s founder. Pearce was a seasoned educator, with substantial experience in the Indian educational system. His national vision for Indian education can be studied in the detailed monograph, *A Descriptive and Critical commentary on the Post-War Educational Development In India, otherwise known as the Sargent Plan*, published by Oxford University Press in 1948. The book was translated into several Indian languages. He was a scholar and had written textbooks in history and geography for India’s public schools.

Pearce’s classroom design began with a baseline test to assess the student’s competency level in a given subject. Pearce explained that tests were not necessarily harmful, ‘in fact they are necessary so that the child’s progress may be assessed by the teacher and by the child himself. But within the system of class-instruction they almost inevitably become competitive, and lead to a struggle for gaining marks, for rivalling others, for somehow obtaining promotion.’5 Depending on the outcome of the test, a student was placed in classrooms suitable to his or her competency level; a student could be in a lower form in English and far ahead in mathematics. ‘By this method of study,’ As Pearce explained in a letter to a parent, ‘a child who is exceptionally bright in some subjects is not retarded by having to work at the slower speed of other pupils; while pupils who are backward in some subjects receive individual attention which enables them to make up leeway in those subjects in which they are weak.’6

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4 Krishnamurti J., *Education and the Significance of Life*
5 Ibid.
6 Quoted by Roshen Dalal in *A History of Rishi Valley School Op cit.*
In a clearly argued document, the principal identified the multigrade classroom structure as a first necessary step in creating the good school.

‘What are the defects, from the point of view of what we are trying to do at Rishi Valley, of the system of class instruction?’ he asked, meaning by the term ‘class instruction’ the whole class monograde teaching format. He answered the question in the following way:

First, obviously, that it encourages the teacher to regard the pupils as a mass, a small block of humanity that can be dealt with effectively with the least possible trouble ...

Secondly, the division into ‘classes’ is based on the idea of putting together children who are more or less at the same level of academic achievement. Obviously there are bound to be a few above the average, and a few below; the teacher will have to adjust the matter and method of his lessons to the majority, those at the average level. . .

Thirdly, the system of class-instruction completely ignores one of the most obvious and universal facts about human beings: no two children (or adults) are ever at exactly the same level in all subjects.7

So Pearce placed students of different ages but similar competency levels in the same room: a student who may be in level 3 mathematics sat with students in English level. In this way, Pearce freed students from the single textbook regime; each student was able to move at his or her own pace through a subject mapped by teachers with the help of multiple books.

Pearce’s design was multigrade in the sense that students of the same age group sat in multiple classrooms, depending on their competency level in the subject. It was not strictly multigrade, in the sense of one classroom accommodating students belonging to several grade levels. The design morphed into a strictly multigrade arrangement first at David Horsburgh’s Neel Bagh and later at the schools set up by Horsburgh’s students.

Towards the end of his tenure at Rishi Valley, the principal reflecting on the intimate connection between structures of instruction, and children’s emotional nature, summed up the goal of his work at Rishi Valley, ‘The main educational experiments at Rishi Valley,’ is education without fear’. He continues,

This involves the almost total absence of punishment and reward, form-orders and annual promotions based on marks, and competitive examinations. On the positive side, the experiment involves the replacement of the motives of fear of penalties and competition for rewards by other forms of stimulus. Up to now the effect of these radical experiments seems to have been definitely in the direction of developing self-discipline and self-reliance and a harmonious social atmosphere, and there has certainly been no decline in orderliness or in academic achievement. The children are remarkably industrious and well-behaved without regimentation.8

7 ‘A Note on “Systems” of Academic Instruction.’ Rishi Valley Archive.
3. David Horsburgh at Neel Bagh

David Horsburgh numbered among the creative teachers attracted to Rishi Valley during Pearce's stewardship. Horsburgh arrived in 1954, and after between five and six years left to join The British Council in Bangalore. In 1972, he set up Neel Bagh on the Karnataka Andhra border, about 30 km from Rishi Valley.

According to his obituary in *The Times* of London, David Horsburgh’ first came to India in 1943, ‘as a leading aircraftman’ in the Royal Air Force (RAF). He was all of 18 years old at the time, having joined the RAF straight out of school. The idea of starting a village school first came to the young man in the Bengal countryside. In the middle of a paddy field, he saw a school and thought, ‘This is what I should have liked in life: to teach in a village school.’ Not any village school but a village school in India for he had, as some Englishmen do, fallen passionately in love with the country. After obtaining a degree in Pali and Sanskrit from the School of Oriental and African Studies he returned to teach at a college in Mysore and after a year he and his wife, Doreen, joined Rishi Valley School in 1954.

Neel Bagh opened with 12 students drawn from nearby villages, according to Usha Narasimhan, who joined the school as a teacher of Telugu in 1972. It remained small; the number of students stood at seventeen for the first five years, and grew to twenty-seven by 1982. Apart from the school, Horsburgh set up a small Teacher education facility. According to Malathi, a young woman who was educated to be a teacher at Neel Bagh, and went on to set up her own school, Vikasana, ‘The purpose of the training was to prepare individuals with the right skills who in turn would start their own small schools in villages’.  Neel Bagh, a brochure, which seems to be have been written in 1984, mentions the schools set up by individuals influenced by Horsburgh’s pedagogical approach, ‘During the last seven years four schools on the lines of Neel Bagh have been started, one in Bangalore, one in Rajasthan, one in Coorg and one in Andhra Pradesh.’

The reach of David Horsburgh’s educational methodology was limited, partly because it depended on intensive teacher training, with an emphasis on direct, intuitive observation of a student’s ‘immediate cognitive needs’. Shekhar Pulla, who was a student of Neel Bagh from the very beginning, maintains that Horsburgh was a master teacher: ‘Appa believed that teachers who tested were not worth their salt. They should be constantly aware of each student’s level of achievement, in each of the subjects being taught.’

Amukta Mahapatra spent a year and a half at Neel Bagh training to be a teacher. In an article written for *The Hindu* she drew out the motivating principles supporting Horsburgh’s method in some detail.

> Which level they [students] were at was not made much of. Wherever they were, what was important was that they had to make an effort to learn. The pedagogical principle was that a topic can be presented to a group, but the learning occurs at the level of the individual. This implies that the immediate cognitive needs of the individual have to be catered to in the classroom.

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9 *The Times* [of London], 21 August, 1984
10 Ibid.
12 Horsburgh, Nicholas in *The Golden Decaders*, ed Asha Williams, January, 1912
14 Neel Bagh [Brochure] p. 18
Horsburgh shared a critique of monograde classrooms, end of term examinations, and progress reports with Pearce. The following from the Neel Bagh brochure echoes Pearce’s similar description of Rishi Valley of the late fifties, quoted above: ‘There are no forms or classes or standards in the school and consequently no promotion: some children because of ability or hard work or various other factors, progress much faster than other children.’

### 4. Usha and Narasimhan at Sumavanam

Two years before his death in 1982, David Horsburgh persuaded a young couple, Usha and Narasimhan, to set up Sumavanam, a school patterned after his own Neel Bagh. The school was situated on the Andhra-Karnataka border, mid-way between Rishi Valley and Neel Bagh; it served impoverished children from neighbouring villages.

Usha was a former teacher from Neel Bagh; she had been with David and Doreen Horsburgh since the beginning, in 1972. She taught Telugu and was simultaneously educated at the small teacher education programme at Neel Bagh. Narasimhan was an engineer from IIT Kanpur, in the research department of the National Aeronautical Laboratory (NAL) at Bangalore when he became friends with David.

A vital feature of Narasimhan and Usha’s approach to their school, one they shared with the pedagogy practised at Neel Bagh, was the careful attention given to each individual child’s learning abilities, her strengths and weaknesses. Careful observation of each child’s needs preceded instruction and the design of learning materials appropriate to the child’s aptitudes. ‘This way, in the span of a few months, it is possible to identify each child’s learning ability and strength. Based on these insights, workbooks are introduced. For every class, fresh worksheets with new images and new ideas are prepared.’

The teaching was like Horsburgh’s constructivist in the classical sense of the term, that is, Narasimhan and Usha were teachers who had the ability to intuit the ‘zone of proximal development’: anticipate the potential learning stage for each child. In addition, teachers were encouraged to adopt a many-faceted caring relationship with their students. That is why the numbers of students attending Sumavanam School was small, and the teachers, as at Neel Bagh, came largely from educated backgrounds. In more recent years, however, students educated at Sumavanam have taught at the school.

Sumavanam represents the typical pre-British Indian school, first documented by Dharampal and extolled by Mahatma Gandhi, with with one significant difference. The approach at Sumavanam is open ended – unlike the early schools knowledge is not a closed system. Besides, as a scientist Narasimhan is able to translate progressive developments in scientific thinking into an educational framework for children and Usha has incorporated new language teaching methods into her repertoire. Unlike traditional schooling, the approach fostered at Sumavanam is dynamic; teachers are encouraged to create fresh pedagogical materials for students.

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17 Neel Bagh [Brochure] p. 2
18 [www.multiworld.org](http://www.multiworld.org)
Narasimhan’s friendship with David had begun in the mid-seventies when the young man attended a lecture by Horsburgh and began exploring possibilities of setting up his own rural establishment. At that stage, David had suggested that Narasimhan join the Rural Education Centre at Rishi Valley. A Krishnamurti Elementary School for village children was established on the Rishi Valley campus in 1948; it had been run more or less as an extension of Rishi Valley’s neighbourhood charity programmes.

After Narasimhan arrived at Rishi Valley his innovations in the multigrade experiment began to yield results: ‘New materials were prepared, and there was more individual work done by the children. Work cards were prepared which could be used by the children proceeding at their own pace’. ³ However, after nearly two years, when Usha fell ill, the couple resigned and Narasimhan returned to his old research position at NAL in Bangalore. His innovations did not long survive the succession of headmasters who followed.

5. A New Dispensation

A new idea of a Krishnamurti School as a resource centre for its immediate surrounding now emerged. Hitherto, the main interpretive thrust of Krishnamurti’s educational philosophy had been on freedom, the new generation of teachers sought a balance between freedom and responsibility expressed in Krishnamurti’s aphoristic statements, such as, ‘you are the world’.

The brochure on rural education at Rishi Valley, subtitled ‘New Directions for a Changing World’, summarizes the new outlook as it affected Rishi Valley’s Rural Education Centre.

- The primary aim of the Rural Education Centre is to extend the educational resources of the Rishi Valley School into the neighbouring countryside.
- A second objective is to regenerate the landscape in a chronic drought area.
- A third objective is to develop an integrated curriculum, which is relevant to the needs of rural people.
- A fourth objective is to provide opportunities for teachers and students of Rishi Valley School to engage with village children in meaningful ways....
- Finally, we aim to promote a village based educational system with the hope that in due course each of these satellite schools will become a nucleus for reviving a village commons where native plants and herbs, fruit-bearing trees, fodder and fuel would be grown.²⁰

Given that Rishi Valley was a stable educational community located in an isolated area of perpetual drought and occasional famine, that the inhabitants were shepherds and farmers,

that the nearest small town was 16 km away, that the closest city, Bangalore, was 120 km from Rishi Valley began attracting agencies looking for reliable ways of channelling funds to the countryside. Rishi Valley applied for and received a grant from Actionaid, an organization that collaborated ‘with local NGOs, community based organizations and people's movements to collectively address poverty, inequality and injustice.’

A two-year grant for setting up two satellite schools plus running expenses for the schools came through and the first satellite school was inaugurated in 1985, in Eguvaboyapalle, a village of forest dwellers resettled on the hard-bitten land during the colonial period. Students and the residents of the village helped build the school on space donated by the village residents, as well as to landscape the grounds and to plant trees. The Actionaid grant helped defray costs for building two such schools. The second satellite school was located between the Harijanwada of Thettu village and Mandomvariapalle.

In 1987, Rama Rao and Padmanabha Rao, a young couple from Hyderabad, applied to teach at the Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre. Rama was the daughter of a well-known Telugu poet; Padmanabha was interested in languages and drama, particularly in folk theatre; together they were interested in educating the poor. Involved in progressive movements while at university, they ran a neighbourhood school in their native village. Isolation made them apply to Rishi Valley Rural Centre in 1987.

Within a decade of their arrival, they introduced a variant form of the multigrade methodology for elementary school that had the potential to scale up outside its home ground: from the Rishi Valley environs to several thousand schools in India’s linguistically diverse states.

### 6. Anil Bordia and a Confluence of Schools

By the early eighties David Horsburgh’s Neel Bagh had captured the imagination of leading educators in India: Here was a dazzling school that offered quality education to first generation learners, in a country which had failed to significantly raise even literacy rates. Horsburgh’s became an influential voice in the Central Advisory Board of Education (C Abe), an All-India body of educators set up by Government of India. Yet, when David died in 1984 and his son Nicholas decided a few years later to move his family to England, Neel Bagh was left orphaned. Horsburgh had not built an organizational structure that would survive his departure and none of his own students, many of whom engaged with their own educational institutions in different parts of India, was prepared to shoulder responsibility for a school in a remote village in the interior of Karnataka. So David’s son Nicholas Horsburgh offered Neel Bagh to Rishi Valley Education Centre in the hope that his father’s legacy would survive.

With a resource base of about 320 fee-paying students, Rishi Valley was hard pressed to buy the school let alone afford the on-going expenditure of running it. Eventually a donor provided the necessary funds and we applied to the Government of India for funds to meet the annual expenditure. Mumtaz Ali, then an associate of Krishnamurti Foundation, his wife, Sunanda, a former teacher of Rishi Valley, and Indrani, Usha Narasimhan’s sister, a former teacher at Neel Bagh, were persuaded to move to Neel Bagh and take charge of it. Narasimhalu and his son Ravi, associates of David, stayed on, taking charge of the craft centre.
Before applying to the Education Department of the Government of India in Delhi for a grant, Rishi Valley Education Centre created a composite vision statement for Neel Bagh, Sumavanam and Rishi Valley Rural School. The design envisaged a complex of satellites radiating out of three central hubs that would be resource and training centres for academic and non-academic instruction. Narasimhan and Usha as the most experienced teachers agreed to act as academic resource persons for all three institutions.

As luck would have it, the Secretary of Education in the Ministry, Anil Bordia, was a passionate educator with an ambitious vision for the country. Bordia was well acquainted with David Horsburgh’s work and saw in Rishi Valley’s proposal the possibility not only of conserving Horsburgh’s legacy but also of extending it.

A certain interdependence developed between the cluster of schools. There were joint workshops between the three institutions. Children from the schools took part in tree planting expeditions, Narasimhan and Usha played a significant role in enriching teacher trainees’ educational skills and monitoring Rishi Valley’s Satellite School; teachers from Rishi Valley School helped create curricular material; workshops brought talent from cities to the countryside, artisans and designers experimented with craft at Neel Bagh, Rama Rao and Padmanaabha Rao worked with teachers to and experimented with ideas for re-structuring classrooms that eventually resulted in the MGML pedagogy. At the end of two years, however, the arrangement broke down as Narasimhan and Usha did not want to set up satellite schools around Sumavanam; they preferred to concentrate on teaching students in their own school rather than monitoring newly set up schools. A deepening interest in the spiritual life drew Mumtaz Ali away from education, and Neel Bagh was once again left leaderless. Narasimhan, Usha, Sunanda and Mumtaz Ali were no longer part of the complex arrangement between the three schools as conceived in the original scheme. Ashraya ‘one of the most reputed institutes in the country targeted at children and women’ now runs Neel Bagh as a residential school for construction worker’ children.

In an interview to The Hindu, Nomita Chandy, who heads Ashraya spoke of role of stable schooling for construction workers’ children:

> We found how these bright children shuttle from city to city without the opportunity of education. Girl children, in particular, are married young because parents fear for their safety. But we also realised how vested migrant workers are in educating their children. A residential school was vital for them.\(^{21}\)

However, the schools around Rishi Valley under the Raos’ direction continued to grow and several rounds of young men and women received training in multigrade methods and creating pedagogical materials grounded in local culture.

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\(^{21}\) 'A home for every child,' The Hindu, March 19, 2011
7. Unique Features of RIVER MGML Methodology

A new incarnation of the multigrade system of instruction appeared on the Rishi Valley campus in its Rural Education School in the early nineties. Rama and Padmanabha Rao’s point of departure in creating the multigrade programme was from the beginning grounded in the context of local schools serving impoverished students, rather than in first principles. They observed a wide disparity in academic competence among students due to children dropping out for longer or shorter periods to help their parents, and then failing to catch up with the rest of the class. Often teachers had to do double duty, man election booths or assist with census counts. Teachers were required to teacher the absent teachers’ classes, i.e. to simultaneously teach more than one grade. It was a classic multigrade situation, which demanded structural changes and specially trained teachers equipped with appropriate study materials suited to each students’ varying cognitive competencies, not ad hoc arrangements that resulted in children failing in basic skills and conceptual understanding.

The Raos decided that the multigrade structures developed at Neel Bagh and Sumavanam were not replicable in Rishi Valley Satellite Schools or in local government schools; the contrast was too great. The teachers at Neel Bagh and Sumavanam were well educated and from middle class homes. The schools had the stability of educational institutions in which classes are multigrade by design and teachers are educated to continually attend to and find appropriate responses to student learning. The teachers at Rishi Valley Satellite Schools were bare-foot, first-generation learners without any special background in academic subjects let alone in teaching them.

The Raos designed a different structure for the multigrade classroom in response to the ground reality. Their design of multigrade programme is described in detail in the accompanying paper, ‘MGML Characteristics and Rationale’. Our concern here is twofold:

- To highlight the specific structures that set RIVER’S multigrade programme apart from the model previously developed by Pearce at Rishi Valley, Horsburgh at Neel Bagh and the Narasimhans at Sumavanam.

- To underline aspects of the design that allowed the scaling up of the methodology to the many thousand schools in India’s linguistically diverse states.

A division between the necessary features of the RIVER multigrade and its contingent features, also explicated in the companion paper MGML Characteristics and Rationale’, forms the background against which we will examine the issues listed above.

The necessary features of RIVER’s MGML, the features that remain constant throughout the scale-up process, are the Ladder Graphic, Classroom Management and Designer’s Workshops. The Ladder is central to the RIVER pedagogy. It has the flexibility of a template, with a variety of content, based on cultural, linguistic and regional considerations, filled into its flexible spaces.

The contingent features consist of the content, guided by the curriculum filled out by cards or textbooks. These are influenced by theories of learning, cultural features and textual preferences that clients mount on to the Ladder. Ideally the curriculum should be sequentially coherent, build content from simpler to complex concepts.
The content of the original materials published by RIVER and known as ‘School in a Box’ included series of sequenced cards in the areas of language, mathematics and environmental science. The material was influenced by a host of creative individuals, among them T. M. Narasimhan, Usha Narasimhan, P. K. Srinivasan, Lalit Kishore, Vishnu Chinchalkar, Arvind Gupta, Alok Mathur, Padmapriya Shirali, Saraswati Dalal, and C. Hanumanth Rao and a host of agencies with which RIVER interacted. The well-known designer Rajiv Sethi, who brought folk artist to the attention of international audiences in the eighties, was an early consultant, as were Vinjhemuri Seetha Devi and Vijendla Sambasiva Rao. Padmanabha Rao himself was involved with folk theatre during his student days.

Given the brief exposition of RIVER's MGML, they are in a position to map some differences between it and the multigrade systems in use at Rishi Valley in the fifties, in Neel Bagh from 1972 and 1984 and that is presently being used at Sumavanam.

- **Learning Ladders:** The Ladders mapping the sequential arrangement of cards has no counterpart in the pedagogies practiced by Pearce, Horsburgh and Narasimhans.
- **Pedagogy:** Teachers of the RIVER MGML are not required to intuit the cognitive level of students; a student’s competency level is assessed by her position on the rung of the Ladder. In the absence of Ladders, the Horsburgh-Sumavanam design educated teachers to sense the learning level of children in a subject. Pearce used textbooks (some of which he authored) and tests to assess learning levels.
- **Classroom Groupings:** RIVER MGML does not divide students into sub-groups according to their competency in a subject. In other words, it does not stream students. Sub-groups in Pearce’s, Narasimhans’ and even at Horburgh's schools were formed according to competency levels. RIVER uses the following criteria: students engage in learning a skill or concept; students work on extending the application of concepts; students are being tested in what they have learnt; students re-engage with concepts they have failed to master; students are enriching concepts they have mastered.

These are several major differences which bear on how teachers are educated, sub-groups in the classrooms are formed and, most significantly, on scale-up processes. During Horsburgh’s lifetime four schools patterned after Neel Bagh were set up. The students he educated went on to set up facilities for teachers and became involved on the national scene. How far David Horsburgh’s influence spread in terms of actual numbers remains unknown.

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22 For a more detailed exposition see ‘MGML Characteristics and Rationale’.
23 Shekhar Pulla, a student from Neel Bagh very emphatically stated that ‘Appa believed that teachers who tested were not worth their salt. They should be constantly aware of each student’s level of achievement, in each of the subjects being taught.’ Interviewed at Rishi Valley on January 8, 2012
24 ‘MLML Characteristics and Rationale’ counters the observation that RIVER MGML does not accommodate a constructivist approach.
25 At Sumavanam ‘Children are split into three groups based on their abilities’. Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India. 10. Usha and T. M. Narasimhan. [www.multiwork.org]. Horsburgh’s statement about the sub-groups is a bit more ambiguous: ‘there are groups which are sometimes formed of individual children who are temporarily at the same of learning, such groups are constantly changing because children learn at different speeds’. Neel Bagh [Brochure], p. 2. Pearce’s classrooms were streamed: children who were at the same level in arithmetic sat in the same classrooms.
26 Neel Bagh [brochure], p. 18
8. Conclusion

The essay traces several stages in the evolution of multigrade-multilevel classroom instruction at Rishi Valley and its environs beginning with the practices of Subba Rao through its development in the fifties under F. Gordon Pearce and its subsequent development at David Horsburgh’s Neel Bagh and Usha and Narasimhan’s Sumavanam. The historical study ends with a brief description of the RIVER programme from the early nineties and its subsequent scale-up to several of India’s linguistically diverse states. The concern has been to show how a group of spatially connected schools mutually nurtured each other and, equally importantly, to highlight the differences between these structure and, in the process, lay to rest historical errors that have crept into the current literature. The following from an NCERT 2011 Evaluation of the Tamil Nadu Programme, is an example of the distortions that have taken hold.

The origin of important components of ABL such as learning ladder, bouquet of books and folk art activities can be traced to methods and materials used in Neel Bagh, an alternative school run by an English man David Horsburgh in Kolar District, Karnataka near Bengalore, and many enthusiastic teachers who have undergone training in the Neel Bagh and set up their own alternative schools in different parts of India.  

The historical record shows that the non-authoritarian structures that Pearce and Horsburgh created, for their schools – that right education ought to pose a counterweight to authority, that schools should be ‘without fear’ – is a legacy that continually evolved. A recent UNICEF Report on the RIVER methodology states that it has spread to ‘over 250,000 primary schools across the country and more than 10 million children in over 13 states’ and that,

- According to research findings, ABL seems to be key in making teachers more friendly and making classrooms attractive and “free from fear and anxiety.
- Evidence tells us that ABL improves social equity by reducing learning gaps among students, promoting social interaction, and reducing social barriers and discrimination.
- ABL enables every child to participate in activities, games and songs, to interact within groups, to move at their own pace, and track their own learning progress.
- ABL provides a simple model of how to integrate continuous assessment into children’s everyday learning to check for understanding.
- Several studies identified a direct positive correlation between features of ABL (e.g. low-level blackboards, display of children’s work, use of TLMs, peer interaction, group work, fear-free assessment, children’s enjoyment and confidence in learning), and increased learning outcomes for children. 

27 NCERT ABL fn. 8, p. 4. Programme Evaluation Report: Activity Based Learning, Tamil Nadu, 2011]

Appendix

The following timeline traces the evolution of the multigrade pedagogy at Rishi Valley and its environs. Rishi Valley School was established in 1931, deep in the interior of Andhra Pradesh.

1931-1944:

Principal Subba Rao adopts the Montessori method, where children across the span of three or more classes study together. His Montessori inspired classrooms are rich in learning resources. Each child receives individualized instruction and lesson plans, in accordance with which students work either individually or in groups.

1950-1960:

The second principal, F. Gordon Pearce, places students in separate classrooms suited to their competency level; a student could be in a lower form in English and far ahead in mathematics. `By this method of study,’ Pearce explains in a letter to a parent, ‘a child who is exceptionally bright in some subjects is not retarded by having to work at the slower speed of other pupils; while pupils who are backward in some subjects receive individual attention which enables them to make up leeway in those subjects in which they are weak.’

1972-1982:

David Horsburgh, a teacher at Rishi Valley School from 1954 to 1959, sets up Neel Bagh, an educational programme with a one-room vertically grouped classroom for neighbouring village children, and a teacher education centre. It is located about 30 km from Rishi Valley.

Narasimhan joins Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre in November 1976 and leaves in January 1979

1980: Usha and Narasimhan establish Sumavanam along the lines of Horsburgh’s educational insights. Usha is a Telugu teacher and has taken the Teacher Education course offered by Horsburgh at Neel Bagh; Narasimhan is an IIT engineer and a friend of Horsburgh’s. Sumavanam is located midway between Rishi Valley and Neel Bagh.

1985-1990:

The first satellite schools are established in two hamlets in the vicinity of Rishi Valley. Over the next ten years the number was to grow to 17.

1987: Rama and Padmanabha Rao join Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre.

29 Some of the information is derived below is derived from the UNICEF (2013), Activity Based Learning in India: Overview, Strengths and Challenges.
1988: Grant from Government of India to Satellite Schools, Sumavanam and Neelbagh. Main REC school not covered by the grant.

The Grant provides for workshops. Eminent educators, Lalit Kishore, Arvind Gupta, P.K. Srinivasa; artists like Vishnu Chanchalkar and Hakubhai Shah. The schools’ host workshops in theatre, puppetry and pottery.

Rama and Padmanabha begin developing a multigrade package with its own distinctive features, based on a close study and analysis of local elementary schools, textbooks and children’s achievement levels. Over the next five years the material is field tested. Results suggest that it helped reduce dropout rates, increased enrolment in schools and enabled students to clear the class 5 State Examinations with ease.

1991: A multigrade programme and with its own distinctive features is created at Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre. A Telugu version of ‘The School in a Box’ is published with a loan from Actionaid in 1991.

1993: With a help of a loan from Actionaid a Telugu version of the field-tested ‘School in a Box’ is published. It consists of graded series of cards for language and mathematics for grades I to 4 in the former and I to 3 in the latter subjects.

The first outreach programme conducted at schools run by The Bhagavatula Charitable Trust, Vishakapatnam, and ILO-supported child labour education project. Teachers learn to organize classrooms and handle vertically grouped students with the help of the material in ‘The School in a Box’.

1994: Two thousand girls from 10 mandals who had either not enrolled or dropped out of school in grade are tutored in a 6-week summer school programme, held in Meboobnagar District of Andhra Pradesh, to grade 2 levels. According to official statistics, ‘about 95% of the students who were administered a test were found to have mastered MLLs (Minimum Levels of Learning).

1995: The Karnataka Education Department introduces the MGML methodology first in Hegana Devana Kote (HD Kote) Block and then in all the 600 formal schools of Sira and Holenarsipura Block of Mysore District. It is currently being implemented in 14,677 schools.

In 1996: The Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), UNICEF and RVEC collaborated in planning, co-ordinating and implementing an ambitious program in the remote tribal districts of Paderu and Rampachudavaram.

The thirty multi-grade centres in remote and educationally backward areas of Kasargode, Mallapuram and Wayanad Districts are set up in Kerala. The numbers have grown. 1600 schools are using this program at present.

1998: DPEP Tamil Nadu partners with RIVER to establish a thousand pilot schools across the state.

1999: DPEP, Andhra Pradesh implements a program in 800 bridge schools spread over 34 mandals in 15 districts of Andhra Pradesh with the specific aim of preventing child labour and bringing the working children back into the educational mainstream. A revised colour version of
the RIVER Telugu teaching-learning material has been supplied for use in the non-formal schools.

**1999-2001:** A Hindi version of ‘The school in a Box’ titled ‘Apna Path Pitara’, is designed by the RIVER team, with original contributions from specially commissioned children’s writers, including Shri Shri Prasad of Benaras.

**2004:** UNICEF partners with RIVER and launches a Quality Package project with the aim of developing an integrated package of quality education in approximately one thousand schools in each of twelve states.

**2005:** RIVER is awarded the Global Development Network Prize (www.gdnet.org). The prize is for its work towards developing a community based educational model of self-sustainable school, as an instrument of lifting the community out of the continuously and increasingly degraded intellectual and environmental scenario. “Most Innovative Development Project”

Multigrade Trainer’s Resource Pack published with a grant from Sir Ratan Tata Trust, to serve both as an important tool for mass expansion at the macro-level and as a constant support for grass-root trainers in conducting RIVER trainings, monitoring, orientation and material development programmes at the micro-level.

University of Regensburg in Germany and University of Metz in France initiated long-term exchange programmes and collaborative projects with RIVER including placement of students from their universities in RIVER projects.

Radhika Herzberger
Rishi Valley

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30 This Award is given to the institution that holds the greatest degree of innovation and the potential for broad application of the project in other countries.