

EDUCATION: INTERVIEW

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A New Perspective on School Education

An interview with **David Horsburgh** by **Rosalind Wilson**

David Horsburgh is well known as an author of children's books published by Oxford University Press in India. These books range from the subject of Mathematics to books on the Environment. Mr. Horsburgh also taught for several years at the Krishnamurthy School, in Rishi Valley. He then served in the British Council and finally decided to begin his own School, in a small village near Bangalore.

This school now has twenty-seven students from two years of age to twenty-one years of age. The normal classroom method is not used because they all sit in the same classroom. Exams are nonexistent. Each child moves at his own speed of discovery, learning is a process for the teacher and also the student.

What are the results? Since David Horsburgh was staying at the India International Center, we were able to arrange a special interview with him, conducted by Rosalind Wilson, Editor of the children's magazine *Target*.

RW: David, you've been in India for many years as an Officer of the British Council and later on, in your own right as an educator and a writer. What led you to start the Neel Bagh School?

DH: Well, I suppose it was my first visit to India. I came here in the Air Force, RAF, in 1943. During the War, I was posted to Chittagong, in Bangladesh, which was in those days of course, a part of India. I used to spend some of my leave about twenty miles south of Chittagong, in a tiny village: two houses, one Hindu and one Muslim, on a little island in the middle of paddy fields. There were no roads, only waterways...and I saw the village school there and thought, really, this is what I should have liked in life: to teach in a village school.

Then, after the War, I went back to England and took a degree. I came back in 1950, and in fact started at the other end: I started as a professor of English in Mysore; and then I went and taught in Rishi Valley for some years. I joined the British Council in 1959, and I left them in 1972 to start my own school. Of course, all the time I have been teaching; and I've been lucky in that I've been able to teach all levels, from pre-primary to postgraduate.

RW: So that reflected in the school when you began it?

DH: Yes, my idea was to have a village school. Well, of course, all sorts of influences, as you can imagine: I mean, Ivan Illich and A.S. Neil and so on. I wanted a school that was going to be very different from the present schools.

RW: Presumably because you thought the present schools weren't doing a good job?

DH: In a way, yes, I'm sure they're not doing a good job.

*RW: So when you started *Neel Bagh*, what did you think that the children would respond better to?*

DH: First of all, you must also have been struck by what Neil said--the fact that schools are all prisons, and children jolly well have to go there. So I thought I'd have a school where children didn't --you know, could go or not go, come or not come, as the case might be. Also, I wanted a school without any punishments.

RW: That's similar to A.S. Neil, hm?

DH: Yes. Although I disagree very strongly with A.S. Neil on a number of points. Obviously, if you don't have any punishments, you can't have any rules. When you have rules, after all, the only way of enforcing them is by some kind of coercive action; in the end, to say: If you can't follow our way of life here, you have to leave, I'm afraid, you can't stay now.

Then, I thought that the curriculum in most schools was very defective. Children, when they get to perhaps one of their most creative periods, at the age of twelve or thirteen, have to switch off many of the creative parts of the curriculum because of exam pressures--which are thought to be necessary. And so I thought that I wouldn't have any exam pressures. In the ten years we've been running, we've never had a test or exam.

I believe that one of the chief reasons for a lot of dropouts, a lot of failures in the school, is the division into classes. So we don't have any Grades, or Standards, or classes. The advantage of this is that all the children can go at their own speed, as you know.

RW: Then you have to have a fairly high teacher-to-pupil ratio for that, don't you?

DH: Well, I am not sure about that. I can manage an English class of twenty-five, by myself. But of course, ours is a very low ratio compared with most of the rural schools at any rate.

RW: I see. But that also means that your quality of teaching has to be very good, doesn't it?

DH: Well. I'm getting round to a completely different idea of the teacher: it's someone who doesn't teach, but who sets up suitable learning situations for each individual child, who learns by himself. People say to me, for example, "Look here, my dear chap, you don't know anything about politics; how can you possibly run a university course in Politics? You see, my job is not to teach: we always think of the teacher as somebody who knows and passes on things; therefore, in a college, you normally have got to have a teacher who has an M.A. in Politics to teach Politics, and a teacher with an M.A. in Literature to teach Literature. History to teach History, etc. etc. Now I don't have a degree in any of those disciplines, you see. But the thing is to get children to learn-- and not to teach them.

RW: Coming back again to your setting up the school, you decided on no rules, no punishments, Free coming and going as far as the children wanted. Therefore, the incentive to come had to be very strong motivation. You must have put a lot of thought into what you were going to teach, and how you were going to teach.

DH: Motivation, absolutely vital, yes. I put a lot of thought into what makes children want to learn. Basically that's the essential thing: that they should want to learn, and then they will learn all right. We are a non-competition school; we don't have any marks, or grades, or promotions: we don't have punishments, we don't have rosettes and ribbons and prizes: so therefore we have a completely new concept of motivating children, you see; I think they are motivated by success. And I think that in my system of having no grades and no classes, no standards, each child is able to be successful at his own speed. And because he's successful, that pushes him on to learn some more.

Now if you have got a group of thirty-five children, the teacher must always be going at a speed which is not suitable for 60-70 per cent of the class: either too fast for the slow ones, or it's too slow for the bright ones. And so both ends turn off, as it were: the slow ones don't learn anything, you see, and the bright ones are frustrated because the teacher goes on saying the same thing again when they've already grasped things... In the system which we work, a child, if he's bright can read four years' work in one--in fact, I had a boy who read four English books, four years' work, in one year. Another child, who finds it difficult, for a variety of reasons, can spend a year and a half over that, or two years, if he likes... Even the slow one, therefore, is successful. My idea is to have a school where everybody is successful. That doesn't mean to say that some children are not going to be brighter than others: of course, they will be.

***RW:** But you don't find that there is any sort of functional motivation that "we will learn if it seems immediately, practically, useful"?*

DH: Oh, no. Certainly not with children. Because, after all, one of the things about education is that you never realize how useful it is until you're educated. It is of no use telling a man in a village, "See, education is great!" He can only think of it in terms of, "Well, will I get a job as a peon in the Government office, if I have an SSLC?" But that's not education: that's a technical paper. Somebody who's not educated cannot see the actual value of education.

***RW:** So it just has to be an enjoyable occupation?*

DH: Exactly. The first step is that the child should like it. But children do, of course, immensely curious, they like games, they like playing and so forth. When they find that they are skilful, they learn skills, which are pleasant--and on they go, you see.

***RW:** Hmm. But I believe you did make some effort to have them do manual labor? You had a fixed timetable? But didn't you describe them building their classrooms?*

DH: Oh, they have a timetable, all right. Oh yes. They have a timetable, and it's a pretty rigid one. But the children can come to class, or not. We don't have manual labor in the way that, shall we say, Gandhiji envisaged it. They did build yes, but that was a normal part of education.

We have a very wide curriculum. Their mother tongue is Telugu, so the idea is to make them bilingual in Telugu and in English. Also they learn Kannada, which is a State language, and Hindi, and Sanskrit. Now in addition, they have a very wide curriculum: Mathematics, Science, Environmental Studies, Art, Craft, Pottery and Carpentry.

RW: How did you decide what the curriculum should be?

DH: Oh, purely arbitrary: all curriculums are arbitrary. For example, we teach philosophy in our school, because I think philosophy is an extremely useful thing for children to learn. But you won't find it, I daresay, in the curriculum of any other school in India because other people don't think philosophy is important. We also teach Aesthetics, or we teach Music Appreciation, we teach Discussion techniques. Now these all seem to me vitally important things for children, but you won't find them in the average curriculum.

Similarly, we teach pottery. Sometimes people come and see, our pottery department and say, "Ah, very good! You are teaching the children pottery so they can earn their living as potters." I'm doing nothing of the kind, of course: I think education through things is essential. You have heard of Eric Gill, the sculptor, who wrote a lot on Education. One of the things he said was, that we never educate children in the use of things-- always ideas, and exercises and games, and so forth, but never things. I think it is important that children should learn how materials exert their own discipline on the user--which is a discipline of the material, as opposed to the discipline of the adult. You know, if I make a mistake in English, you are the one that corrects it. If I make a mistake on the wheel, you know, the clay says to me, "You're not treating me the right way." If I plane a piece of wood against the grain, it becomes rough. The wood is exerting its own discipline on the child, you see, which is a marvelous thing. It's not an external discipline, as it were: it's ingrained in the material.

RW: Your children, when they have grown through this school, have they become ambitious to get into the mainstream?

DH: Oh, we haven't had any children who've grown through it yet. We've had one boy who's just passed his B.A., and he was a sort of dropout from the village who couldn't pass the PUC. And so we took him and said, "All right, we will push you through the exam."

We've got one boy who wants to join the IAS. We have a discussion every week, when we talk about what they would like to do; and most of them are not quite decided yet. I am very often attacked on these grounds: that we are giving children a high standard of intellectual attainment. They learn five languages, for example, and their English is very good--my kids of twelve or thirteen are reading their seventh play of Shakespeare at the moment, in the original, you see. That is pretty high standard when they are in a dual medium school, you see, it is not an English medium school. And they are mad about Shakespeare: They think it's the greatest thing ever, yes: We are just reading Othello...

Yes, people criticize me and say, "You are drawing these children away from the village." (Of course it is always urban people who tell me this!)—I say, "Well, you see I'm not here to manipulate human beings. I'm here to give them the best kind of education I can think of their having. So that all their potential is brought out--that they are able to think, to feel, to have loving relationships, to be able to understand things, to speak, to express themselves, to use materials, to understand the environment, to understand what exploitation is, and all these various things. What they then do is not my business. I'm not here to say, 'You ought to stay in the village and help other villagers.' mean, if they want to do so, they will do so. If they want to go to the big city and become painters, then its O.K. by me, I'm not there to tell them what to do."

RW: Is your approach to working out a suitable curriculum for rural children so that they can find employment?

DH: A rural curriculum doesn't appeal to me at all. I think this is all nonsense, brought about by the urban 5 per cent elite who run the country, and who run the educational system and, in fact, ensure that most of the rural population drop out of the educational system. I'll bet you saw the all-India figures published about three months ago, from Delhi: 65 per cent of the Fifth standard is the overall figure throughout the country, for dropouts. I should think the figures are probably going up. You see, the curriculum, the resources for education, are all concentrated on the 5 percent elite urban population. The village schools around us have two hundred pupils and one teacher. Ridiculous! Our local high school has a 4 per cent Pass rate in the SSLC. Can you imagine it? --Children who walk three miles to school every day for ten years, and fail at the end of it!

RW: But you are not going to get David Horsburgh's in every village, are you? To set up the kind of system you set up, you need rather extraordinary people even to run the system.

DH: I have got another four schools running, with my students—I have a small training school for teachers, too. And if and when I find committed young people who would like to start schools like this, then I train them usually in a two-year course after a First degree or an M.A. or... At least I require a degree. Then I train them for two years, the idea being that they have got to teach every subject up to the SSLC, and then they start schools of their own. I've got four going now, each one in a rural area, each one with about fifteen to twenty-five kids. And those schools are doing well, run by people who have learnt how to do it. So it can be taught.

RW: Yes, but I have seen something of the way in which the mobile crèches have been organizing their training programmes: how they've taken not-very-well-educated people, given them tremendous amounts of on-the-spot training, and constant supervision. But it's fairly clear that the amount of back up required is tremendous. I mean, for example, the ratio between the supervisor and staff teacher.

DH: Because of the fact that you are getting what one might call uneducated people for the training; they don't have any philosophical basis on which to base their ideas. Therefore, they need a lot of supervision and so forth. They learn techniques; they go on doing them even if they're not suitable; they don't see that they're not suitable, because they don't understand the underlying philosophy; all they take is the technique.

RW: But then you come back again to this fact, that you do need a certain quality of mind to run this system?

DH: Absolutely right. You need some kind of education--that's why I expect a First degree! (Not that people with First degrees are educated, or anything like it!) We provide an environment where young people can learn how to teach. Our object is to teach people how to teach; which means, first of all to provide them a school where they teach.

The idea of having a training school without a school is just ridiculous! It is like teaching a child pottery without a potter's wheel. But every training school in the country has no school! It is incredible that you

can have a teachers' training unit without a school. You need children, if you are going to train teachers. So a school is actually running, where my trainees get about 800 hours of practical teaching in their courses. Now that's really something. At least they can control the class, they can interest the kids. They have access to a workshop, and then a good library, where they can read. The workshop is particularly important, because most young people in India have not had any training with things, with their hands, and so they're not used to cutting and pasting and learning a bit of carpentry, and so on... Most of the girls have never had tools in their hands at all, anytime. They make quite a lot of visual aids, do a lot of reading, and then I give them four assignments a week, and so they do a lot of theory. They have seminars twice a week, when we discuss education matters, and also things that they've found difficult in their reading. They have a course in General Psychology, Educational Psychology and the Philosophy of Education.

***RW:** your whole approach is not the approach of educational planners, is it? They start from analyzing what you consider the needs of society to be, and they fit the system to try and meet those needs. If you need more clerks, you introduce more clerks, more engineers... and so on.*

DH: Oh yes, educational planners! For a start, there is no dearth of them! Well...in India many, many years ago, educated people would become clerks; that's what the educated manipulators are doing today. If you want more scientists, you just pay them more, and lots of people will come up and want to be scientists.

***RW:** No, but the whole point of mass education is that it is essentially manipulated, isn't it?*

DH: At the moment, we are manipulating 95 per cent of the population. Mainly because the elite 5 percent, designs the curriculum to benefit their children; it is designed entirely for people who are going to Universities. You look at the Science syllabus, the average school syllabus: It's geared to what the universities want. It's much too much for the average village teacher to teach, or the child to learn. So they all drop out-which is very convenient, because we don't want them to perpetuate in the same system, you see.

***RW:** How can you envisage a system, which would not allow them to drop out and yet be still a mass system? You see your individual school, run by enlightened people, doesn't seem feasible on the kind of scale that is required.*

DH: Oh, it is feasible. I have just written an article on this, as a matter of fact, for a friend of mine who's running a newsletter, which puts the point very clearly; that unless educational planners begin to think clearly about these problems, nothing is going to happen. There seems to be a sort of double thinking going on, you know, that the people at the top think that things are happening which are not happening; they think that the syllabus is a good one or the curriculum is a good one--but it is not being put to practice.

If you go to our local college, which is about fifteen miles away, you find some people who are taking English. They have some textbooks; we'll say *Richard III*, and *The Tale of Two Cities*. Now, none of those students will read those books at all. They'll neither buy them nor read them. They'll learn a few essays on them, and they'll produce these in the exam. Now the people who arrange the curriculum, the

people who examine it, and the people who teach it, all think that the students are learning about literature, they are not doing anything of the kind! (laughs)

RW: So how do you suggest that the educational planners go about it?

DH: Well, there are lots of obvious things that could be done. Let us take one for example. Now, you know how many people fail the SSLC. In order to avoid this, one could have a system where children take as many or as few subjects, as they want to, and at different levels. That is, you can have Basic Mathematics or Advanced Mathematics. You would give grades in these subjects, and a child may, when he's finished school, take three subjects, or he may take five subjects, or he may take two subjects.

Now this means that somebody, who wants to go to University and study PCM, may take Advanced Physics, Advanced Chemistry, and Advanced Mathematics. If somebody doesn't have any particular ambitions like that, and perhaps is not intelligent enough, he will take, shall we say, Basic English and Basic Telugu, Basic Mathematics and Basic Environmental Studies: He gets four grade C's.

The Government declares that for peons they want at least C grades, for somebody else, they want four Bs. The University may say we want three. A's, or five A's, or ten A's, as may be. Now this means that everybody passes, but at a different level. So when you are employing somebody you don't say, "Have you passed the SSLC?" you say, "What have you got?" The chap says, "I can read and write. I have got a B in Telugu and B in Mathematics", and "Fine! Then you come into our organization and you can work as a clerk." When you put out an advertisement for a Government peon, you say SSLC, because you want him to read and write. Now he might be able to read: you don't want him to know science, for heaven's sake!

My grand daughter wants to go to Technical College, in Hastings and their requirements are four C's. Marvelous, you see; four C's. I mean four passes in four subjects, any four subjects. If she wants to get into University, they would want certain higher requirements, or in particular subjects. But hers, every child has got to pass the SSLC in all subjects - at one and the same time. More important, all the subjects are of a high standard because they are geared to what the people want at PUC level. PUC is at a high level because it is geared to what people want at the University level. And so this is why so many people fail.

RW: David, I believe you started an adult education center in the same village as your school.

DH: Well, not really, no. What we did do at one time was to have some of the parents coming along to learn. And it didn't work out, for a variety of reasons. A bunch of parents left, it was very awkward for their work, it was very awkward for us to give a suitable time when they could all stop work and come, and so we then finally gave it up. But it was a small beginning; it wasn't really an Adult Education Center in a village.

I am not sure about Adult Education. I often meet quite a lot of people in Adult Education, and I always ask them what they're doing and why they're doing it, what's the philosophy behind it; and hardly anybody can give me a proper answer. "Well, we are going out to the villages and teaching adults to read." "Well, why?" "Well, because it is good to read."

RW: Presumably they also think that it would give them a little bit more grip on the situation in which they find themselves. Galbraith thinks it does, doesn't he?

DH: I don't think being able to read is much use. I think being educated is useful. Adult education. But what a huge problem, dear girl: I mean who is going to educate who, and where, and how, you know? Education is a long-term business, isn't it? For adults, especially for villagers.

RW: In Delhi, they have started a free school called, "For Drop-outs".

DH: No, I don't know about that. But I am thinking about older people, you know. That is one thing. The next thing is, having made them educated, which would include literacy, someone might ask me, what are they to read: The two most important of the mass media surely are the newspaper and the radio. And there, again we are back to the good old elite business; that the average villager can't understand the news on the radio; and he can't even if he could read, he wouldn't understand the newspaper either. If you hear the news bulletins in Kannada or in Telugu or in Hindi, you can't understand a word: We are talking about how many radio sets there are in India, but all they play is film music: they don't play the news because they can't understand it. The same with these newspapers. If I read out the news in Telugu to my cook, she can't understand a word of it!

RW: Do you find amongst your children that they are becoming more aware of their own environment - in terms of how they can act upon it to make it different?

DH: Yes, of course. Naturally. Yes. As they become more and more aware of the system, of exploitation. A simple example: there are some Government loans for houses, for some of the villagers. Now they have to give about 20 percent back to the people who sign and pass the papers: From a loan of one thousand, they have to give two hundred back. Oh, we know all about how common this is but they are becoming more and more aware of it. Also the effect of religion on the thinking of the older village people is disappearing with the young.

RW: Have there been any difficulties between parents and children on this?

DH: Yes, naturally. As soon as you start educating the child, you start alienating him from the village environment, from his parents, whose world is the village. The child's world now stretches back to Mohenjodaro and Harappa, and it goes from America to Greenland and so forth and so on. So it's a very different world from the parents' realm...The children, because they have discussions on religion, and sex, and exploitation, and politics and whatever, you know, they start being rather skeptical about many beliefs in the village--religious beliefs, for example. So yes, there are very often clashes between the parents and the children.

RW: Have any of them stopped their children coming to you?

DH: No, none, not so far and the longer they leave them with me, the more difficult it will be to stop them doing anything! I'm afraid the girls are happily warding off marriage: I've got some girls, who are eighteen, or nineteen, and of course they should have been married about three years ago; but they are set on getting a degree. So they've won that much for themselves ...A good lot of things are changing, yes. To give you an example of the kind of change that goes on: when I first started the school, all

parents beat their children, fairly regularly. And now, only one does, and probably he only does it when he's drunk. So this seems to be a step, a change: I mean, whether it's a good or a bad change is a matter of opinion, but changes do take place... Boys have much more voice in the family matters than the average boy of fifteen would have. The parents do look to them for more sensible advice: and they do try and make their parents save some money, make them not drink so much perhaps, or think about land problems, village problems, and so forth,

RW: Much of the thinking about education of late has been that without the incentive from material prosperity, people won't go to school. Do you find that a factor with your children?

DH: Well, I must admit that occasionally I've done a bit of blackmail on parents who wanted their children to look after goats, instead of going to school, by saying, if your child comes to school, he will get a good job, and then you won't have so much work to do, and so forth. That's a bit of blarney on my part, I admit. I would think that because they are uneducated themselves, they just think of education mainly as a way of getting a better living.

RW: But do they see the possibility of building a better quality of life? Is it something which now is a part of the children's thinking?

DH: The children do. I thought you were meaning the parents. It manifests itself in their approach to all sorts of things, surely. Take an appreciation of art, which their parents have never heard; or Shakespeare; the way to handle wood, or clay, or drama, or growing things, or being able to discuss things--to have new intellectual experiences, and so forth. All these are very exciting to them, I think.

RW: David, right from the start you have put a lot of stress on learning languages, being able to read?

DH: Yes, I think communication really is the most important thing in education. Once you teach a child to read, once you teach him how to learn, your job is done, really; and the third thing is to motivate him to want to learn more. That's it. If he can read, and he's motivated to want to learn something, then the average educated adult can learn anything he wants.

RW: Is that why you have taught them English?

DH: Partly. You see, most of the mother-tongue medium schools teach English, though of course the children don't get any facility in English because they have only one period a week or something like that. In English, we have a huge selection of children's books, as you know: Geography and History and Geology and Stamp-collecting and Electronics. You name it, and there are fifty or a hundred different books available. Money is the only criterion. In Telugu or even in Kannada, we don't have those books. So a child, who can't read with facility in English, is as far as I can see, not able to get a very wide education, because the material is not there. So I thought, he must know English.

On the other hand, because most English medium children don't have an Indian language with any decent degree of competence, the English medium students are cut off from the mainstreams of Indian cultures. They don't get Western culture, either. A sort of Enid Blyton, pop scene, funny sort of culture—and nothing else. Language is the great transmitting factor in culture, isn't it? Unless they have an Indian language, they are not going to really understand much about India....

RW: Your own books on English are very structured, aren't they?

DH: Well, they have to be, for the market, otherwise people won't read them, or won't prescribe them; and of course if no schools prescribe your books, then the publishers take them off the market. So I have to: my books are always a compromise. You can't write the book you want to write, because probably nobody would buy it. I did once write some books that I rather wanted to write: science books and they are not doing very well, I fear because they are so unlike the normal science books.

RW: How?

DH: Well, for example, they have a lot of open-ended questions. Now you know the average science book has got this sort of thing--a picture of a frog on one side of the page: "A frog has four legs, it has a long tongue, it eats flies." And on the other side of the page, "A frog has--legs", and the child fills it in and thinks he's done something, and goes on to the next page. My books are different from that, in that they ask children to find out things, to observe them, and to record what they observe, and so forth; and later on, to analyze the results of their observations and recordings. Very often in Science, there are a number of factors to which there are a number of variables. The light answer is the great thing in education, these days, and therefore my books are not much liked, because there are a lot of open-ended questions, and things, which are meant to provoke discussion, rather than the "right answer".

RW: But then you must have intelligent people to discuss with.

DH: Well, children are intelligent. You can discuss it with the children.

RW: Then your teacher has to also be sensitive enough to know what to say.

DH: Well of course, teachers have to be sensitive: I mean it is like saying, teachers have to be educated: Yes, they should be educated. They are not, that is why we are not getting any Education!

RW: But isn't that also why people are going into teaching machines, and things like that?

DH: Nice idea, I think, yes. But I mean, where are we going to have --a hundred million students, I suppose we have got in India at the moment, than teachers.

RW: What about the radio?

DH: Children and schools don't have radios, for one thing—I remember going once to a very eminent institution in this country where there was a seminar on the use of the TV. I made my usual rude remarks about TV: you see, TV can only be at best an enrichment programme for education. I mean if you had one station in Delhi, shall we say putting out an hour a day for each standard; it would still have to have about ten hours a day--that is only one hour a day for each standard. What would the children do? So it can never be much more than an enrichment programme.

Of course, you get marvelous pictures of polar bears and underwater scenery and electronic devices but you see I think that people think they are marvelous programmes, but you really don't learn from them

because it is purely passive. That is not learning. Learning's an active thing. And the television is a passive medium, and that is where the danger lies: you think you are learning and you are not learning anything.

RW: It sounds to me, David, as if your concept of environment is also much broader than most people's when they talk in terms of environmental studies. You have written books on this, haven't you?

DH: I have written some books for children on Environmental Studies, yes. Again they are not doing very well, because they expect children to study the environment; and of course, teachers do not want children to study the environment--all they want them to do is to learn the book by heart. I will tell you how teachers, supposedly quite good teachers, can ruin a textbook. I came to Delhi about two years ago, and a friend of mine said, "I have got a friend here who is teaching in a school, and they are using your text books, and she would like to come and talk to you about it." I said, "All right, bring her along." She came for breakfast, I think and I said, "Well, first of all, you tell me what you do in your school."

I opened the book at random, at a page on trees, and it said, "How many different trees can you see on the way to school? Do you know the name of any of them? Can you find leaves on them, and draw them in your book?" And so forth and so on. I said, "You tell me precisely what you do in the class, what you are expected to do." She replied, "I take the book and read: 'Trees. How many trees can you see?' So I go through it like that. Then I write the names of the trees on the board, the children write them in their exercise books and then they learn them, and the next day, I ask them what the trees, were, you see." This is, I mean, unbelievable: This is a good school in Delhi. Now what do you think goes on in other schools? Of course environmental studies are important; but nobody studies the environment in the urban situation. You can ask children, "What different kinds of shops can you find on the way home" when you are being driven back in your cycle-rickshaw, or whatever it is. And they won't be able to tell you. They don't know anything about the urban environment or anything else, or the rural environment.

RW: The general picture is pretty grim, in that case. Where do you break through?

DH: I do not know what the answer is to this. I can only say, I am going to sit in my little village and try and produce what I think is very good education. Some children, perhaps educated in freedom - no fear, you know, not being competitive, being much aware, etc - perhaps they will find solutions to which I cannot find with my background and my conditioning.