

DAVID HORSBURGH OF NEELBAGH

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The number of schools in our country is legion. But creative, child-centered learning places are few and can be easily listed – Tagore's Shantiniketan, Gijubhai's Dakshina Murti Balmandir and just a handful more. Such creative schools are often the dream of a passionate individual. One such creative school was the Neelbagh School founded by a British - David Horsburgh (pronounced Hosbro).

David first came to India in 1943, as part of the Royal Air Force. He was based in Chittagong. The serenity of East Bengal inspired him. He saw a little island in the middle of paddy fields. There were no roads only waterways and there he saw an idyllic village school. This was the life he thought he would like to lead, teach in a village school.

David went back to England to pick up an advance degree. He returned back in India first to work as a professor of English in Mysore, then taught in the Rishi Valley School and did a stint with the British Council. Finally in 1972, he started his own school.

One major influence was A. S. Neill - founder of the famous Summerhill School. Neill equated schools to prisons. So David thought of a school where children could go or not go. David thought the curriculum in most schools was very defective. Children had to switch off many of the creative parts of the curriculum because of exam pressures. So, he completely abolished exams.

David's ideas of an ideal teacher were also very radical. A teacher is someone who doesn't teach but who sets up suitable learning situations for each individual child, who learns by herself. He earnestly believed that children learnt a great deal without being taught. Most teacher training colleges do not have an experimental school. They are ill equipped for the task. It is like trying to learn swimming by just reading a manual and without the swimming pool. David had a small in house teacher training school with just half a dozen motivated young interns. They studied theoretical aspects of child development in the morning and then practiced them on children during the afternoon sessions in school.

The small band of teacher's who went through David's intense internship programme later on did pioneering work in their own ways. For example Malathi who later started Vikasana was attracted by an advertisement in the [Deccan Herald](#) in the 1970's put in by David "Wanted teachers, but not trained." The purpose of the teacher training school was to prepare individuals with the right skills who in turn would start their own small schools in villages.

In all my life I have visited over 2,000 schools. But there has been no school like Neelbagh. I first visited Neelbagh in the early 1980's. And that sacred image still lingers starkly in my mind. The school was located some 30 kms from the Rishi Valley School. Beautiful low cost Laurie Baker buildings made from local bricks, red tiles, clay and thatched hay dotted the 7 acre campus. The main academic room was a long hall - one wall of which was composed entirely of shelves. These shelves were full of books – curricular books, enrichment books, story books. There were also hundreds of simple puzzles, teasers, games and teaching aids – mostly made by the children and teachers themselves.

Some fifty children from ages 5 to ages 22 learnt and worked in the same room. There were one or two adults who could be called teachers. They hung around to help children just in case they needed any assistance. There were no lectures, no monologues. Yet each child worked independently. A girl could be doing 5th grade Telegu, and after finishing her book, she would place it on the shelf and pick the 6th grade book. She could also simultaneously be going 3rd grade English and 7th grade Mathematics. The nice thing was children were free to learn at their own pace. They could be learning different grade subjects at the same time.

Sometimes a child would need help. But instead of seeking out the adult teacher she would naturally gravitate to a child slightly older to her - someone who had just struggled with the same problem. This youngster would prove to be a better than the adult teacher.

The school had wonderful learning spaces strewn all over. Four granite pillars grouted in the ground with a thatched roof made cool alcoves where the children could rest, read and play. David Horsburgh the founder of Neelbagh had an amazing collection of books – some 7,000 of the most priceless books on a wide array of subjects. Many of them were difficult to get activity books. David's pedagogy emphasized learning by doing. There was strong emphasis on working with the hands. They had a well equipped wood and a clay workshop. David was deeply influenced by the sculptor Eric Gill who said, "Never educate the children in the use of things – always ideas, exercises and games but never things." 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 discipline of the adult. For instance, if I make a mistake in English, the teacher can correct it. But if I make a mistake on the clay wheel the clay tells me 'You are not using 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 in a very marvelous way. It is not an external discipline, as it were; it is ingrained in the material itself.

I saw a fourth grade child actually make a wooden cupboard and take it home. Children would participate in making scores of jigsaws and other puzzles which were later sold in Bangalore. With this the children earned a little bit of pocket money. David sincerely believed in the Socrates like dialogues with children. So, each Saturday was devoted to the pursuit of philosophy. Children came to the school much before the school started. This was because the school was the most wonderful place to be in. Even after the school got over they hung there until sunset.

The Neelbagh School was meant for poor village children whom ordinary schools would not admit or would fail. The children paid no fees. The children helped build the school and gained good experience in construction technology. I was amazed to see the level of confidence of these village children. They knew over a 100 songs in ten languages of the world. And they would not let you go unless you sang for them! Most of these poor village children were quite fluent in five languages – Telugu, Kannada, English, Sanskrit and Hindi. Many of the Neelbagh children privately passed SSC and then went to study engineering and medicine.

Neelbagh was not a low-cost school. The buildings ostensibly were simple and harmonized with the surroundings. But the school was full of rich ideas and resources. David had an old car whose components were dismantled and assembled again and again by the students. David along with his son Nicholas wrote over a 100 school books published by the Oxford University Press and Orient Longman. The school expenses largely came from the royalties accrued from these books. It is sad that all these creative books are out of print.

Someday someone will certainly write a more detailed history of Neelbagh. The school broke many stereotypes and proved several points. Firstly - human beings everywhere share 99.99999

percent of the genes. That given a chance, our village children are as gifted as any child on earth. They just need a chance.