

## **Discovering Place-based Education in the Foothills of the Himalayas**

By Monimalika Day with Doug Hernandez

*Bank Street College of Education, Occasional paper Series, No. 33. Adapted from*  
<https://www.bankstreet.edu/scholarly-initiatives/occasional-paper-series/33/foothills-himalayas/>

The Himalayan mountains are known worldwide for their magnificent heights and their astounding natural beauty. However, the fragile ecology of the Himalayan region makes it especially vulnerable to soil erosion and landslides due to deforestation, building and road construction. Social changes, such as migration of men to the cities for work and the effects of the tourist industry add to the area's problems. It was here that I (Moni) conducted a case study on preschools run by Prakriti (pseudonym), a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to environmental conservation through education.

The central feature of this paper is a portrait of a teacher conducting lessons near a pond in a remote village in the foothills of the Himalayas. It describes how the teacher provides opportunities for her young students to explore their natural environment and helps them to connect with their place. It is essential to note that her story represents the efforts of many other preschool teachers working with Prakriti.

In India, preschool education is offered in three kinds of settings. First, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the central government provides preschool education in Anganwadis (centers offering health, nutrition and preschool education). Second, in cities and towns, many private organizations and franchises launch their own programs. Third, NGOs run Balwadis to bring preschool education to marginalized communities and places that are difficult to access. The story presented here is a slice of the data collected while I was conducting a case study of Balwadis run by Prakriti in remote Himalayan villages.

### **Portrait of a Teacher**

A Balwadi trainer and I (Moni) were returning from a trip to a selected center when the trainer mentioned that there was another Balwadi tucked into these hills. This center had been closed for six months because the former teacher had left and there was no one to run the program. It had reopened recently when one of the young teachers married and moved to a village nearby. It is worth noting that the concept of near and far can be viewed very differently by people from the hills and those of us from the plains. A steep climb of 1.8 miles is often described as nearby by a pahari (one who lives in the mountains) but might be a very strenuous and difficult climb for someone who is not accustomed to these heights.

We got out of the jeep and after walking for half an hour on a stone path, we reached Nanda's Balwadi. Cellphones rarely function in these areas, so she had no prior knowledge of our visit. When we arrived, Nanda was busy with a language lesson. After completing it, she turned to the trainer and said she had planned a paryavaran bhraman (an environmental walk), which was part of their regular curriculum. We asked her to proceed with her lessons as planned.

The teacher began the walk by picking up a yellow polythene bag, in which she had kept paper boats she and the children had made the day before. She lined up the children, singing "rail chali chuk chuk" (the rail [train] goes chuk chuk) and some of them joined the singing. She then walked down the stone steps, and confidently led the children to a nearby pond lined with stones. As an outsider, I was somewhat nervous about the depth of the water and hoped

the teacher knew what she was doing. Guessing my concern, the trainer used a stick and showed me that it was only about 1.5 feet in depth. Later, I learned from a conversation with a member of a local NGO that the pond was a reservoir built to harvest rainwater; it also helped to slow down the seepage of water underground, which causes flooding during the monsoon season. The water was used by the villagers for their animals.

First, Nanda had the children sit on one side of the pond, where she tossed in some pebbles and pointed to the concentric circles in the water, saying “gola baan geya” (we made a circle), helping children to recognize the shapes they observe in their surroundings. As she threw pebbles, leaves, or grass into the water, she asked the children if they would sink. The children responded enthusiastically with a “yes” or “no” as they carefully focused on what was thrown into the water. She then asked children “kyun doob raha hai?” (why is it sinking?), but did not get much of a response. She laughed and repeated the question, urging the children to think more about it. Nanda also used a stick to make circles in the water as the children watched intently. She then encouraged them to explore the water and splash it. Some of the children closed their eyes and turned their faces away as the water splashed upward. One child moved away from the edge. Others looked around for pebbles, threw them in the water, and then pointed to the circles they formed.

Meanwhile, Nanda picked up some pebbles and grass, which she asked the children to put on their individual boats. She made each child feel special as she assisted him or her in gently releasing their boat and observe it floating. Some of the water splashed up as the children attempted to push the boats out from the edge of the pond. During this activity, Nanda sang “nao chali nao chali” (the boat moves, the boat moves), a Hindi rhyme. Once again we heard some of the children’s voices as they joined in the singing.

After encouraging the children to explore the water and its properties, Nanda introduced them to a few of the animals that live in the water. She pulled out a paper frog she had made from her bag, named it, and had it jump in the water, to the children’s delight. Then she brought her hands together and sang “machli jal ki raani hai” (the fish is the queen of the water), a popular Hindi rhyme sung in different parts of India. All the children joined in this time, either by bringing their hands together to make the fish and moving their thumbs (as the fins) or by singing the song. Many did both the action and sang, showing their familiarity and enthusiasm for it.

On our second visit the following day, Nanda introduced a new water animal, the crocodile, which is found elsewhere in India. She drew a circle on the ground and initiated the game, played by children in many parts of the country, where a child pretends to be a crocodile. Other children step in the circle and the crocodile chases them, pretending they are prey. In this way she engaged them in dramatic play while they were learning about the crocodile.

On the way back to the center, Nanda encouraged the children to explore the surrounding areas, to jump from a small stone wall, and to climb on the lower branches of a tree near the Balwadi, both with her assistance. She was ensuring that they had sufficient opportunity to practice their gross motor skills. These opportunities are critical for young children living in these mountains. We often observed women dangerously perched on a tree to get leaves or cutting grass on a steep slope for the cattle. The word “santulan” or balance was often mentioned when we traveled in these areas, and it is an important part of the curriculum.

Next, Nanda stopped the children at a small patch of land near the Balwadi where she had helped them plant seeds of some local crops a few weeks earlier. She encouraged the children to observe how plants grow by posing questions such as “kya ye chota paudha hai?” (is this a small plant?). The seedlings were about 1.5 inches and some of the young investigators began pulling them out of the ground to study them closely. Nanda knew they were trying to answer her question and did not get angry with the children. She just corrected them gently by saying “are poudhe ko mat nikalo” (oh, do not take out the plants), and showed them how to replant the seedlings. She also helped children identify the seedlings, which included corn, millet, and kidney beans, by comparing and contrasting the shapes of their leaves.

I have been in the field of early childhood for more than 25 years, but I have never seen such an informative, well-integrated, and joyful set of lessons. The teacher created opportunities to learn various concepts through exploring, naming, and imagining that helped the children bond with their environment.

### **The Balwadi Classroom and Curriculum**

The Balwadi centers are all located in or near a village. The center itself is usually a room with floor mats for the children to sit on. The dimensions of the room can vary greatly depending on what the local community is able to arrange. The materials are organized around the classroom as “corners,” such as the dolls’ corner and the art corner. There is outdoor space surrounding the building, which is for activities and play, and some Balwadis have a large tree near the entrance. Extending beyond are areas to explore, such as the pond, walls, and gardens in Nanda’s Balwadi center.

The presence of local and recycled materials in the classroom sends a quiet message to the children and their families regarding the importance of their environment. While each center receives a few materials that are centrally procured—such as puzzles, crayons, slates, blocks, and some books—Nanda’s center relies mainly on local materials. We noticed that dried gourds, grass, leaves, seeds, and grains were displayed in the classrooms and used in many activities. Children were given opportunities to play with water and clay. Many centers had clay beads used for fine motor activities. In addition, there was an emphasis on using recycled materials. For example, the trainers and mentors visit local tailors to collect pieces of cloth. Dolls and balls are made from these scrap materials.

In Prakriti Balwadis, the curriculum is activity-based. The curriculum consists of eight different activities. Teachers are encouraged to develop their lesson plans by selecting activities from these categories. They are:

1. Bhasa gyan (knowledge of language)
2. Anka gyan (knowledge of mathematics)
3. Kahani (stories)
4. Khel (games)
5. Bhavgeet and kavita (songs with expressions and poems)
6. Samanya gyan (common sense or daily experiences)
7. Paryavarn siksha (education on environment)
8. Prayogatmak karya (activities related to daily life that promote logical or scientific thinking)

Although environment is one of the eight categories described in the curriculum, our observations revealed that concepts and materials from the child's environment were carefully woven into many activities, and into all other categories. For example, in the language activities, teachers often discussed different kinds of plants, flowers, and fruits. Local crops and seeds were used for sorting and teaching colors.

Storytelling is an important activity in the Balwadis and teachers are encouraged to engage children in this activity every day. When we observed the training sessions at the Prakriti headquarters, teachers were not just encouraged to read books but were given ample time and opportunity to develop stories on their own and depict them on charts. During our visits to the centers, we observed several storytelling sessions where teachers had written stories focusing on local animals, birds, and fruits. The trainer explained in Hindi: Our curriculum is connected to the environment, like the bird, and everything in a child's life. Second, we take the child out of the classroom. We allow children to understand things from their own perspective. For example, if the child goes near a butterfly, what is the child imagining about the butterfly? Let the child form his or her own ideas. For example, we must show them the fog, the dew. Where did the fog come from? Why did it come? We let children explore their environment using their own imagination.

Prakriti provides support to the teachers through regular mentoring from margdarshikas (mentors or those who show the way). The margdarshikas in turn receive mentoring from trainers, when trainers visit the programs. These supportive relationships, together with the curriculum, allow teachers to develop lessons grounded in their own sense of the place.

### **A Community-based Program**

Prakriti started preschool programs for 3-to-6-year-old children in villages where there was sufficient demand, and where the community was willing to take responsibility for developing the program, making decisions, and monitoring it. Villagers contribute by building the Balwadi in a number of ways, including donating land, labour, and money. The classroom where Nanda held her classes was part of the panchayat bhavan, the local government building. In a conscious effort to engage the community, Prakriti provides the bare minimum: some teaching/learning materials (as noted above), and the teacher's salary.

In each community, the villagers select a young woman from the same village or a neighboring village to be the teacher. Some have completed secondary school education while others have not. Prakriti provides the necessary training and mentoring for the teacher, as well as a small stipend during training sessions. It organizes the timing of the program based on the nature of agricultural work and the need for childcare in the area. Local people are expected to monitor the day-to-day functioning of the program with support from small local NGOs, referred to as the sanstha. This collaboration helps to decentralize decision-making and ensures the active involvement of local people in the day-to-day activities of the centers.

As community members meet to discuss various issues related to the Balwadi, they come together as a community for a special cause. Avibhak goshti (parents' meetings) are held to make decisions. However, each Balwadi teacher is also expected to host meetings of the Mahila Mandal Dals (a women's group), which deal with larger issues, such as sanitation in the village, protection of the forest, and reforestation. The following excerpt (translated from the Hindi) from a focus group discussion illustrates the close connection between the

preschool program and the women's group: First, we collected the money, and we collected utensils as well. The Balwadi came before [the work on] the forest. Then the mahila mandal dal (women's group) made restrictions on deforestation, fenced the forests, and did everything by donating their labor, including constructing the building for the preschool.

Recognizing the serious ecological problems in the region, Prakriti has focused on creating cohesive communities and supporting villagers to learn about different parts of the village ecosystem so they can promote sustainable development. Education is an important strategy through which they raise environmental awareness in both children and adults, and engage them in active reconstruction and advocacy.

During a 1980s literacy campaign, the women in remote villages urged Prakriti to create a place where they could leave their young children while they did their daily chores. Thus, the Balwadi program was started in response to a demand from the community. According to the director, "The Balwadi was conceived as a place where the foundation of environmental education could be laid" (USNPSS, 2001, p. iii). It began with two programs in 1987 and because everyone in a village is interested in children, the Balwadi became an important platform for forming a cohesive community. The program expanded rapidly until 2001 but then began to shrink as Anganwadis, the government preschools, expanded in the area. Although Anganwadis are conceptualized as community-based programs, the implementation of that concept remains a challenge that has not yet been realized.

### **A Crucial Platform for Knowing and Valuing Place**

When considering the Balwadis and the good early childhood practices that they employ, it is difficult to draw a distinction between place and education. Rather than developmental needs being facilitated exclusively within the walls of classrooms, places of origin were at the center of each child's learning experience. While the main focus of our study was on observable best practices that prepare young children for school, the environment and environmentalism emerged as a noticeable bedrock for children and families connected to the Balwadis.

This experience shows how rich a curriculum can be when it honors a teacher's experience and his or her own sense of place. When working with women who do not have access to higher education, many organizations in India simply tend to develop a scripted curriculum. It was apparent that Prakriti, the sponsoring NGO, gave teachers guidance about early childhood education and about helping children to connect to their environment. Most important, teachers were also given the liberty to construct their lessons. When teachers and children have a shared relationship with place, they are more likely to become stewards who care for it. As Judson (2010) aptly points out, children need to first love and bond to their natural world before they can be asked to heal that world.

Modernization often transports us from our places of beginning and displaces us from the context and reliability of our environment (Hutchison, 2004). In many respects, education globally is moving more towards homogenization. This monolith offers young children a single story of what prosperity is, and what it looks like. Often, we are preparing children for a global economy that displaces them and creates voids where a sense of place or belonging could exist. Similarly, Gruenwald and Smith (2008) describe globalization as distorting the meaning of personhood and what membership in communities should look like. In these

global definitions of belonging and prosperity, there is barely a mention of environmental prosperity born from relationships between people and nature.

The more I engaged with the fragility and strength of the Himalayan villages, the more I became aware of the Balwadis' role as ambassadors of place. Children there are getting connected to place through exploration and experiential learning. In much of India, where Western programs are often imitated, formal preschool education segregates children from their language, place, and community (Kaul, Chaudhary, & Sharma, 2014). Even in these remote hills, we observed many so-called "English medium schools." These private programs, housed in concrete structures, have difficulty finding teachers who are competent in English, yet they often impose strict rules that children must communicate only in English once they enter the premises. By contrast, the Balwadis provide children with immediate and lasting opportunities to preserve their language, culture, and place. Since the teachers are from the community, they are fluent in the local dialect and only slowly introduce children to formal Hindi. Children benefit from every opportunity to develop as active citizens in the process of knowing places and being active in shaping what their places will become (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

The simple, yet powerful lessons offered through the Balwadis generate and strengthen connectedness to place, which in turn has the capacity to mitigate globalization and reduce environmental degradation. However, perhaps the greatest lesson these experiences have brought me is a reconsideration of what school is, or can be. For the Balwadis, the Himalayan foothills are more than just the topography. Here, the teachers and children attribute meaning—both personal and emotional—to place every day. According to Judson (2010), people ascribe meaning to the places they experience in daily life, which helps them to form connections to the world and develop a sense of belonging. In turn, that sense of belonging enables them to become ambassadors of the places that they inhabit.

This concept is congruent with the great Rabindranath Tagore's vision of education. A famous Indian poet and philosopher, Tagore conceived school to be a place where a child could discover himself or herself and the larger universe through active exploration and deep engagement with the immediate surroundings (Pridmore, 2009). He despised rote memorization within the confined walls of a classroom and conducted classes in the open air under trees, a tradition which continues to be practiced in the school he founded in 1901. (Tagore's school, Patha Bhavana, has grown to include Visva-Bharati University in West Bengal.) To make education meaningful to children and prevent them from dropping out of school, we need to explore ways in which we can help them to make sense of their immediate environment and connect to it.

## References

- Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. A. (2008). *Place-based education in the global age: Local diversity*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hutchison, D. (2004). *A natural history of place in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Judson, G. (2010). *A new approach to ecological education: Engaging students' imaginations in their world*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kaul, V., Chaudhary, A. B., & Sharma, S. (2014). *Quality and diversity in early childhood education: A view from Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Rajasthan*. Delhi: Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development, Ambedkar University.
- Pridmore, R. (2009). The poet's school and the parrot's cage: The educational spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore. *International Journal of Children*, 14(4), 355-367.