

# **DIGANTAR IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY FOR JOYFUL LEARNING**

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## **Abstract**

The hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning and the fascinating complexities of life. The school has to provide for all these experiences. However, this experience of 'going to school' destroys children's spirit to learn, their sense of wonder, their curiosity about the world, and their willingness to care for the human condition. After finding an 'extraordinary sameness' in our schools, Goodlad (1984) wrote, "Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions. ... Why are our schools not places of joy?" (p 242) As educators, we have the responsibility to educate and inspire the whole child - mind, heart, and soul and put more joy into students' experience of going to school and get more joy out of working inside one. It is rightly said that joyful learning can flourish in school - if you give joy a chance. This paper discusses the example of Digantar schools as a case study of alternative schooling for joyful learning.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Children have more or less treated as pure, as sacred, as way to lead men to the Kingdom of Heaven. Maria Montessori held that 'The unknown energy that can help humanity is that which

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lies hid in the Child' (p 4). He is the perpetual source of inspiration and hope. Jagannath Mohanty (1998, p xi) said "Children like flowers should bloom fully and naturally so that entire world gets enriched, prosperous, happy and peaceful with all fragrance and colours". This most precious asset of the humankind needs to have a firm foundation of a just and happy world. Only with this kind of base would the potentialities of the child brought to the maximum and his innate qualities of hand, head and heart be properly nourished and bloomed. They need to be provided opportunities for 'joyful learning'. However the present education system seems to be stifling in nature hampering the natural behaviour of the child. It treats the child like an empty bottle where knowledge has to be stuffed in and provides limited opportunities to try their hands at new things or to be creative. Children seem to be like 'coolies' on the railway station of the school carrying the heavy baggage of monotonous teaching-learning system. "Digantar" is a fresh breath of hope in otherwise mundane educational practices. The paper further dwells on this alternative schooling practice adopted at Digantar with respect to the teaching –learning process. The objectives of this research were –

1. To decipher the philosophy of Digantar.
2. To understand the innovative practices with respect to the teaching-learning process at Digantar.
3. To comprehend the teacher education programme at Digantar.
4. To explore the components of joyful learning through Digantar experience.

### **METHOD**

The study used a case study approach to have an in depth study of a particular situation rather than a sweeping statistical survey. The approach used brings out the details from the viewpoint of the participants.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

The data was collected through both formal and informal participant and non-participant observations made by the researchers during a week- long visit to the Digantar schools from 6<sup>th</sup> of February to 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2012 as a part of an innovative college trip.

### **MAIN FINDINGS**

There is so much to share about Digantar that words would fall short of. However the main inferences from the observations have been placed under the following headings for better comprehensibility of the readers.

1. **BACKDROP OF DIGANTAR** - Digantar **SHIKSHA EVAM KHELKUD SAMITI** (henceforth Digantar) is a voluntary organization registered under the Registration of Societies Act, Rajasthan 1958 on March 31, 1987. The organization has its roots in David Horsburgh's teaching at Neel Bagh where Rohit Dhankar (present Secretary of Digantar) spent nine months as a trainee. Reena Das (present Director of Digantar) who undertook condensed training at Neel Bagh for five months joined him at Digantar. They started a small experimental school at Jaipur in 1978-79 with the support from Anokhi, a socially sensitive business organization dealing in textiles and indigenous crafts. This school, with roughly twenty to twenty-five children of different age groups with varying social backgrounds generally became a vibrant centre for experimenting, revising and affirming what the two teachers had imbibed at Neel Bagh. Thus, a coherent vision of education started to take shape in which good quality education was not only seen as a fundamental right of every child but also as the most potent means of creating a just and equitable society. Slowly a consensus emerged that the aim of education should be to develop rational autonomy, sensitivity to all, democratic and egalitarian values, dignity of human life, capability to work, and respect for labour and to simultaneously enable the child to be a self-motivated and independent learner.

In 1986, this small group felt that the rural children especially the underprivileged had none or limited options in terms of getting a good education. Subsequently, a project called Alternative Elementary Education Project (AEEP) was conceptualized with support from Ministry of HRD. Under this project three more schools were started 'under the trees' in adjacent villages. Local communities provided active support to these efforts. The approach used seemed to work and soon caught attention of other individuals and organization working in the field of elementary education at the state and National level. Digantar subsequently registered as a non-profit organization in 1987.

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Since then, Digantar has been running four schools under Alternative Education Project (AEP). At present, the AEP programme reaches out to 665 children (386 girls and 258 boys) through the schools running in the immediate rural neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jaipur. These schools offer free education to children until Senior Secondary. The organization has developed its own teacher training programme for running this school along with curriculum and textbooks until elementary level. The major aims of the organization are:

- To conduct research in all aspects of elementary education.
- To establish and run schools to provide good quality education to children.
- To help other organization in similar ventures.
- To work for the advancement of society in general.

2. **DIGANTAR IN ITS PRESENT FORM** - With Alternative Education Project as the core programme, Digantar is also implementing three major projects in government schools for providing quality education to all. Shiksha Samarthan project is being implemented in 100 schools of Phagi block in Jaipur district and two other programmes are in Baran district of Rajasthan. A 'quality education programme' which is being implemented in 78 schools of Baran district is a collaborative effort of Digantar, Vidya Bhawan society, Udaipur, ICICI centre for elementary education (ICEE), Pune and Rajasthan Shiksha Parishad. The Sandharbh Shala project also being implemented in 44 schools of Baran district aims to address the issue of educational marginalization of Sahariya tribal children through action research and by promotion of good quality education. What began as a tiny experiment in educational innovation at primary level in 1978 has now evolved into a theory of elementary education. Digantar experiment has attracted attention of eminent educationists, education departments/ bodies of many state and central governments, and educators especially of elementary education.

3. **PHILOSOPHY OF DIGANTAR** - Digantar visualizes a pluralistic, democratic society that safeguards justice, equity, freedom and human dignity to all its members. They endeavour to contribute towards realizing this vision through education that develops independence of mind and courage to act. Their chief concern is that all children should get a good elementary education because they see education as a right due to each member of the

human race and as the most potent means of creating a just society and of sustaining it. For them education is a typically human endeavour which aims at: a) the development of a rational understanding of the world; and b) the development of capacity (ability) to transform an idea into an object or into an action. These things put together will bring about a commitment to humane, democratic and rational values as well as the capacity to work for their actualization. According to Digantar, an over reaching aim of education should be to help the learner become rationally autonomous individual, and a sensitive and concerned citizen. Therefore elementary education should aim at:

- The development of rational understanding of the natural and social world,
- Development of ethical and aesthetic understanding,
- Development of sensitivity to other beings and development of capability to work.

Learning, the development of the understanding as well as that of the mode of activity, is a lifelong process. The process of learning has to be self- sustaining to continue for a whole lifetime. They held that the main objective of elementary education should be to ***‘help the child become an independent and motivated learner’***. Second major concern is that this ***‘help should be provided to each and every child’***. This means that it is the responsibility of every human society to create conditions so that each member of the society receives his right due to him and the concerned system has to be sensitive and responsible enough to ensure the same. The third aspect relates to the process of learning. An educational programme which aims at initiating the children into a process of lifelong learning has to recognize that it is possible only if the ***‘learning process builds upon the child’s life experience’***. In their view the child’s existing understanding and skills are the only available ground on which further development is possible.

Digantar believes that the theoretical basis of any educational programme is extremely important. Often are found the reasons of failure of educational programmes in the lack of clarity on the basic principles of the programme. The three principles mentioned above, are thus their fundamental principles. All the major and minor aspects of their activity and understanding of the various aspects of their engagement are shaped and guided by these principles.

4. **TEACHING- LEARNING AT DIGANTAR** - To decipher how teaching- learning happens at these schools, various components of the encompassed programme are discussed below:

**School** (Ratwali and Bhavgarh): The schools are the places where Digantar practices its 'alternative 'concepts, developed through an intense journey of more than 30 years. They provide spaces for practitioners to learn and simultaneously enrich the theoretical understanding which Digantar had developed in all these years. Certain highlighting characteristics of schools are -

- Children are not divided into forced homogeneous class.
- Children are divided into groups based on their levels of learning; each group consists of 28-30 students at elementary level and 15-20 students at level of Secondary (Class IXth and Xth ) and Senior Secondary ( Class XIth and XII th).
- Self-learning and peer group learning are the basic principles of classroom organization.
- Children actually learn in an atmosphere of freedom, openness and security marked by total absence of fear.
- Cleaning and beautification of school is a collective responsibility of the whole school.

**Teacher:** The teachers understand education and its relevance for a democratic society; understand how children learn and their environment- socio-cultural as well as physical; and understand human knowledge and the process of its formation. Few of the qualities and capabilities of Digantar teachers consistent with their philosophies are as follows:

- He/she is democratic and egalitarian in his/her values and social concerns.
- He/she is capable of winning confidence of the community and should be sensitive to the community's critiques of the school and it's functioning.
- Teachers learn from each other, help each other, check each other, share their achievements and setbacks etc.
- Freedom is seen as the collective freedom of the group of teachers and responsibilities as the collective responsibilities of the group of teachers.

- They have the ability to observe the effects of their own intervention, reflect and analyse them.
- They should have a certain understanding of and command over the subject areas.
- They have a certain understanding of the place and importance of the subject areas in human understanding and effect on human action.
- They have the ability to help the child without indoctrinating him.
- They have the ability to raise stimulating questions of fundamental importance which lead to an increase in the sophistication and growth of the child's understanding.
- They have the sensitivity towards other human beings, towards the community and particularly towards the child.

The above list may hint that Digantar requires superhuman beings but instead of super human beings standing apart from each other, they have a group of ordinary human beings standing together on the grounds of shared concerns, values and understanding.

**Curriculum and pedagogy-** The term 'alternative' envisages their philosophy and approach which is different from the traditional established institutions and reflects values which are different from the conventional organizations. Certain specific characteristics are:

- Digantar curriculum has a marked tendency to become child specific.
- It has a universal component as well as a very strong local specific component.
- It is a conceptual map of human understanding with flexibly defined routes to be followed by individual learners and a set of guiding principles regarding the pedagogy.
- The curricular framework is such that the teacher is able to formulate learning programmes for the individual child most suitable to him by assessing his needs and abilities.
- Content and process of education (pedagogy) are inseparable in practice.
- Encouragement is given to self-learning, peer learning and co-operative learning.
- Multi-level and multi-age classrooms wherein each and every student of different levels is encouraged to interact and learn from each other.
- Children decide for themselves the rules and regulations replacing punishment.

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- Children assess their mistakes on their own rather than teacher correcting for them.
- Usually it happens that a teacher or few students access the almirah and the material in it. But at Digantar, if any student needs a notebook or pencil , he/she would go to the almirah , fetch whatever is needed and use it. They take responsibility for the material they are taking out; have a sense of ownership and do not waste anything. If they want anything, they have themselves formulated rules of their group and abide by those fully including teachers.

I met a student of Bhavgarh school who had spent six years and she was very happy to share her experience. The first thing she remarked was ‘ I feel being at the Diagantar school is the biggest gift of God’. I feel lucky to be a part of this school as whatever I know today is because of my teachers. My teachers are like my friends and they never beat me , which is the best thing I liked about Digantar. We feel very secure and safe to study here and all are problems are handled in a very appropriate manner. The teachers sing, play and dance with us which gives us a great sense of enjoyment. The teachers are very concerned about the students well being. In our village child – marriage takes pace since in Rajasthan children are made to marry at a very small age. When the teachers get to know about it, they come and visit the community members and try their level best to make them understand that child-marriage is against the law and in a way one is destroying the innocence, enjoyment, desires/ wishes of a child at a very young age. But if the parents still do not understand they make it a point that even after marriage children are sent to schools for getting education which will help in the development of the individual as well as the society. The majority of the students consist of girls, so Digantar has done a very impossible task of encouraging girl education in a Muslim community against all odds. I respect the spirit of the teachers and wish more such schools to get established near our area. I feel very excited and good when teachers from other countries like Australia, Unites states come with their team and teach us with a lot of interesting things and they speak in English but even though we are not able to understand their language are able to decipher a lot from their saying with the help of the gestures they make and we learn a lot of new concepts in an easy manner.’

Teaching/learning methodology is based on these principles is very different from what is commonly understood as by ‘classroom teaching’. For example if learning from friends and in



cooperation with them is accepted as a desirable process the teacher does not remain the sole authority, the seating arrangement in the class changes, talking in the classroom cannot be prohibited and so on. Similarly, if freedom of pace of learning is accepted the homogeneous groups called 'classes' disappear, usual kind of examination becomes impossible, one cannot 'pass' or 'fail' the children, yearly promotions become meaningless; and the teacher cannot teach the same thing at the same time, with uniform speed to all the children in a group. The investigators were fortunate to have a firsthand experience of the strategies/ techniques and activities adopted by the dedicated teachers in different subjects which are as follows:

- a) Language - Mother tongue as the basis for standard Hindi/ English. There was use of phonic charts, flash cards, pictures, wall dictionaries, sentence strips, story-telling, art and drawing, poems with gestures, vocabulary enhancing through games, collection of different story books/ reading corner, picture reading, guided writing, reading comprehension. Overall a top-bottom approach followed wherein, if a story was told, rather than emphasizing on the theme and meaning of the story, the teacher conducted a lot of pre-reading activities like activating their schema for linking their previous knowledge with the new knowledge. In the end a lot of post reading activities were conducted like diary entry etc. which kept the students fully involved in the activities assigned by the teacher related to the lesson. Children are encouraged to develop the skill of word meaning making and finding by them which gives them immense pleasure. I could also see teacher making use of phonic charts in classroom for recognition of sounds and learning of second language (pronunciation and spelling etc). One of the teachers remarked 'Don't tell the child where the word is, but how to find the word.'
- b) EVS – The use of discussion, observation, questioning, reasoning, experimentation, singing of rhymes, experiential learning, linking events with concepts, tracing the roots of social and sensitive issues, story-telling, linking the knowledge gained through text-books with experiences. For instance for teaching the theme 'work' there was a chart in the classroom which was divided into two sections. One section highlighted 'which work you like to do' and 'which work you don't like to do'. Both the sections were filled with students responses. The teacher rather directly teaching

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the lesson from the textbook first asked the students about their views and then linked their previous knowledge with the new concept.

- c) Even for teaching concepts of mathematics, resources were used from surroundings, like for example pebbles were used for teaching basic mathematical operations, and table teaching through counting. For instance, the way teachers taught place value was very interesting. Children could easily differentiate the place value in a two digit number and actually understood the concept. Simultaneously, they learnt roman number system (primary form). Using this method, dual purpose of learning a number system, understanding the base system, place value was satisfied.
- d) At the end of the day or the last period of the school was mostly of craft especially teaching the students carpentry by adding vocational element in education. In addition to it this activity helped the students in developing their kinesthetic skills and gave a vent to their emotional expression.
- e) At Digantar School, I could see children organizing and performing plays related to social issues. Such plays are conducted every month in order to help children respect and be sensitive to each other needs.

Apart from the above, students are also encouraged to participate in co-curricular activities like play, dance, music and carpentry for their holistic development.

**Community participation** – Digantar has been promoting strong interactions and relations with the community. They hold that -

- The schools belong to the community and reflect its ethos and aspirations.
- Teachers should regularly interact with parents to understand their views on the schools and get feedback on their children's education.
- Community participation should permeate all aspects of curriculum and teaching/learning methodology. For this, teachers regularly interact with the people to understand the community's socio-cultural as well as politico economic functioning.
- Community interaction on weekly basis is organised to discuss and share issues.

The basic premise behind all these efforts is education should be embedded in community via individual expression and activity.

We also happened to meet some community members near Ratwali School. I could see a sense of satisfaction on their faces by sending their children to Digantar schools. An old lady remarked “ Digantar schools are very good and different from other schools. Our children feel very happy going to such schools. Teachers never beat them and treat them with love , care and attention. Children share all their joy and sorrows with the teacher who is a friend, philosopher and guide to them. Teachers have a lot of patience and visit the community members once in a week to discuss the progress or any problem faced with the parents. We have a lot of trust on these schools and our children no matter have to travel 5 Kms to reach to the school never complain and feel over joyous to get ready and reach their school on time. We try our level best to help Digantar teachers and this organization in whatever way we can do by proving space for building more such schools. But our only concern is that our children can study only up to VIIIth class and after that they have to study in other schools of the area like the Government school and private schools which are not so good as they beat our children and they do not learn good things from those schools”.

**Teaching/learning material** - The material does not bind the learner but is capable of being used in a variety of ways and helps in keeping the general course of progress in a direction consistent with the total approach. It encourages learning through one’s own efforts i.e, self-learning material. Teachers design and make their own material, adapt and copy the material produced by others, use other’s materials in their own fashion and also use material as the original producer designed it to be used. Modification of teaching –learning material is done as a basis for evaluation of teaching-learning process.

**Classroom management strategies** – The classroom practices were symbolic of the philosophy of Digantar. Some of the observations are shared by the researchers here -

- Self-discipline, wherein rules are made by students and teachers involvement like with the saying of 1,2,3 all are supposed to sit in a circle, a rule which they have formed for themselves.
- Sitting arrangement wherein first all sit in a semi-circle including the teacher and conduct a ‘Sabha’ wherein students are given opportunities to take decisions with

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respect to games, and activities to be conducted inside or outside the class. Also they reflect on the previous day activities and other issues of the classroom. Additionally responsibilities / duties are also assigned.

- Dignity of labour wherein the students as well as the teachers do the cleaning, sweeping together. The important thing to observe was the students are never forced to do anything but they themselves realize it as their duty and take joy in whatever they do.
- Discussion/ '*Baatcheeet*' is used as an effective classroom management strategy wherein the students have the freedom to express their problems, concerns and suggestions or can even pin point when the teacher himself breaks the rules of the class.
- Equal respect to both student and teacher wherein they don't follow a hierarchical system; the teacher is not seen as an authoritarian figure but as a facilitator, friend and guide. There is a lot of trust and faith for each other.
- Bal Panchayat wherein students themselves vote for the selection of their representatives as in a democratic system avoiding to any favouritism amongst teachers towards students.

I met a teacher and he shared 'that at Digantar they share a very special relationship with the children. Children love to share their happiness and sorrows with their respective teachers. The children have a lot of trust on us and have no fear to express what they wish and desire. We make it a point to pay individual attention to each and every child since in our class different age group and ability students study at the same time. We distribute work according to the ability and potential of the child. Since the majority of the children mostly come from Muslim community, we also encourage them to seek education from Maulvi and this is highly appreciated by their parents since we give them freedom to gain knowledge with respect to their religious scripture 'QURAN'. We play with them every Friday and the game is suggested by the students only. We never beat any child as we believe love , attention and care is the need of the hour for the holistic development of the child'.

5. **TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME** - From the above discussion, it is clear that a well thought out and rigorously implemented teacher education programme is an absolute must. The teacher education programme must have a two- fold aim of developing the required capabilities in individual teachers as well as forming a self regulating group of teachers. Another thing which needs attention is that ‘training’ cannot achieve the above mentioned two fold aim. ‘Teacher Training’ would be a grossly misleading misnomer. On the other hand, the name ‘teacher education programme’ seems to be a tall claim for such a basic programme of short duration. Therefore, wherever the word ‘training’ is used it should be understood to denote a ‘ teacher education programme of limited scope’ and not in its usual sense of ‘rigorous drilling in particular skills and a programme aiming at engraining particular values, attitudes and habits in the minds of the trainees’.

**Modalities of Teacher Education Programme:** The Teacher Education Programme at Digantar is divided into several phases. In the first phase of the programme, the main aspects are-

- (i) The participants are provided *opportunities for reflection* to have a closer look at their own understanding in general and at their own notions of education, child, teaching, teacher, community, environment, values, knowledge, formation of knowledge etc. in particular. Each participant tries to articulate his position clearly and coherently for others. In the process their language starts becoming more and more precise, concepts get more clearly and sharply defined; and each one comes to see that others have different views.
- (ii) The reflection sets the stage for *discourse on child education* in particular and life in general. Inconsistencies, ambiguities, critical thought and reason in general are fostered. In the process emerges a common ground of shared understanding, concerns and values for the group, which is a precondition for any group to work together. Each participant learns from others and teaches others. Here the content of the programme is derived solely from the participant’s own worldview. The ‘trainers’ participate in the programme exactly as the ‘trainees’ but present only problems and hints regarding relevant criterion/methodology for deciding/ finding solutions, and do not present the solutions, even if they have one for themselves.

This is because no solution to such problems is final and all solutions are meaningful only in the context of the broader world view in which they have been formulated. When the group formulates its own worldview the desired solutions would come up automatically in the group.

- iii) During the analysis when the lack of information about the school system and about the community is noticed and felt, the participants *visit other school for observation and study*, and visit the villages to meet people and understand the community ethos. These visits are taken up in small groups of 3-4 participants. Each group writes a report on its own experience and presents the report to the larger group where it is discussed in totality, observations, interpretations and all. Similarly, the participants interact with the children in 'classrooms' which actually don't appear to be as classrooms and again do reporting, sharing, and analysis in the group. Innovative names of the classroom are suggested by students themselves like savera, chameli, ragini, pankh, chandan etc to make them feel at ease and comfortable and creating no fear in their minds in coming to school.
- iv) Lots of creative activities like story/poem writing, drawing/painting, play acting, singing etc. are organized so that each participant gets an *opportunity to express creatively and gain confidence*. For instance in chandan samuh / group I found that for pedagogy of Mathematics children formed their own word problems from their own surrounding followed by discussion in the class not only with the teacher but also their classmates. In the classroom I could see how creativity and expression was emphasized. For instance in the art class , every child participated in play, dance, singing, craft etc. and did not go home tired but full of energy and happiness.
- v) For formation of a consistent and coherent understanding of elementary education *chosen books on education are read and analyzed* in the group. People who know about elementary education are called to interact with the group and share their ideas. This kind of exercise raises new questions and points to the weaknesses and gaps in the understanding of the group as well as to the ways to remove these shortcomings.
- vi) With the help of so acquired intellectual apparatus the group starts studying the curriculum and methodology of teaching. Each participant redefines his relationship and understanding of the subject areas like language, mathematics and environmental

studies. The emphasis is laid on recognizing the particular contribution of each subject area to development of total understanding of the world and to perceive the particular nature of that subject area; how it is understood, how it grows etc. The emphasis in the whole exercise is on understanding the fundamental concepts and structures of each subject area more than on acquiring information.

- vii) Regarding the teaching methodology more work is done on the criteria to recognize and develop sound teaching methods consistent with the whole approach rather than drilling in particular teaching skills and methods. Particular methods and skills are taken up only to understand and formulate the criteria more clearly and to build up a repertoire of examples of both acceptable as well as unacceptable methods. At this stage, the participants also investigate choose, make and design teaching –learning material.
- viii) All these activities occur more or less simultaneously. The training merges with the actual work in the schools in such a way that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact day on which the participant stops being a trainee and becomes a teacher. Actually none of them ever stops being a trainee because for them every day is full of challenges and learning. Once the participants take up the full responsibility of teaching a group of children more practical day-to-day problems are taken up. Since the basic ground is prepared, the necessary intellectual apparatus is formed and activated, the teachers themselves find good solutions to the problems they face. Every day at least two hours are spent in preparation for the next day’s work and every week one full day is devoted to the theoretical / philosophical as well as practical problems of teaching. This helps in deepening/broadening understanding and sharpening the skills continuously.

**OVERVIEW** – Digantar is a Sanskrit word connoting ‘beyond the horizon’ or a change in direction. The schools visited, the children met and the teachers interacted with all seem to embody this prophecy. The small group is well realized so that in order to make sense of education and its role in society, one has to locate various educational activities into a general theoretical perspective. Hence, the teachers of Digantar school approached educational theory with actual problems raised during their practice and did not take any pedagogical principles for

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granted without actually testing them in the school. The observations in the classrooms made us realise that ordinary people become extraordinary teacher in an atmosphere which gives them freedom, where they are relaxed and where they share a warm relationship with children. Affection and faith of children in teachers is the strongest factor which makes them responsible and concerned about their progress.

To come back to where we started from, ‘there can’t be any technical parameters to define joyful learning but it lies in what each teacher and student does’. This is what we felt at Digantar where we could see the joy in the eyes of the students with each and every task they were involved in. This was possible because teachers themselves were enjoying doing the activity/task with interest and enthusiasm. Anybody who is engaged in the task of teaching should understand that ‘If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn’. This is what joyful learning is all about.

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