Holistic Visions of Education stemming from Alternative Schools in India

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Abstract

In the global south, there has been a long-standing interest in holistic education; Indian thinkers such as Gandhi, Aurobindo, Tagore, and Krishnamurti have foregrounded similar ideas. However, there is a limited understanding of how teachers in today's world perceive these ideologies. The study uses an embedded case study across five Indian schools inspired by aforementioned thinkers to explore teachers' perceptions of the purpose of education. The findings suggest that teachers pursued education for harmony as the primary purpose of education, and proposes a holistic education for harmony as a way of living instead of pursuing it for knowledge or competencies acquisition.

Introduction

Contemporary broader purposes of education

Several international development reports, such as those by D. Souza & Balakrishnan (2012), Delors et al. (1996), Faure (1972), Keevy & Chakroun (2015), Krathwohl et al. (1964), OECD (2015, 2018), Trier (2002), and UNESCO (2014b, 2018) have highlighted that quality education should focus on a holistic range of learning outcomes, especially Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Learning To Live Together (LTLT), and Global Citizenship Education (GCE). There has been a growing interest in the fields of holistic education (Miller et al., 2018), SEL (CASEL, 2003; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007), moral and virtues education (Schwartz, 2007), education for Emotional Intelligence (EI), and LTLT (D. Souza & Balakrishnan, 2012; Delors et al., 1996). The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 has provided a renewed interest in the field by highlighting the need of education for sustainable development, global citizenship education, and peace education (UN General Assembly Resolution, 2015).

Unfortunately, mass modern education has predominantly focused on access, foundational mathematics, and literacy learning outcomes (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2012;

Skinner et al., 2013). This has led to several parallel discourses drawing attention to the broader purposes of education. Freire et al. (2016) and Noddings (2003) emphasise ethical caring, while Nussbaum (1997) highlights the requirement for an education that shapes people to be citizens of a complex world. Biesta (2008), Freire (2005), Giroux (2010), and A. Kumar (2008) introduce emancipatory and participatory education aimed at bringing about social change. Additionally, over the last few decades (and century in the global south) there has been a growing interest in holistic education, highlighting the need for going beyond the modernistic, anthropocentric approaches of education (Miller et al., 2018). Similarly, a range of Indian philosophers (Dalai Lama, 2014; Gandhi, 1968b; Krishnamurti, 2000; Tagore, 1929; The Mother, 1977a) have long since stressed upon the importance of holistic education emphasizing education's role in contributing to emancipation, equality, peace, harmony, oneness (or interconnectedness of all living beings), and enlightenment (self-consciousness and self-realisation).

Indian thinkers' vision for education

Various Indian thinkers strongly advocated an education for harmony, using different terminology, albeit largely synergetic, including ideas of education of the heart (Gandhi and the Dalai Lama), education of the spirit (Aurobindo and Tagore), education of the psychic (Aurobindo) and flowering in inner goodness (Krishnamurti). Broadly, they emphasise an education for inner renewal and social change (Gandhi, 1968b; Thapan, 2001). These seemingly two separate goals, one focusing on the spiritual self and the other on society at large, were considered to be related to the other through ideas of individual responsibility to maintaining social order (Thapan, 2001). This is underpinned by spiritual

epistemologies wherein the world is understood to be deeply interconnected. Education for both of these goals, inner renewal and social change, was understood as holistic (or integral) education.

Education for inner renewal has been referred to with several different terms. Mahatma Gandhi addressed it as education of the heart, referring to spiritual training and character education as a means of self-realisation, developing empathy, building tolerance, enabling conflict resolution, and promoting community living (Gandhi & Kumarappa, 1953). Similarly, the Dalai Lama speaks of education of the heart in terms of mindfulness, oneness of humanity (shared humanity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of everyone), better understanding of emotions, forgiveness, compassion, and tolerance (Dalai Lama, 2014, 2015; Dalai Lama et al., 2009). Moreover, Aurobindo Ghose asserted that the central aim of education is to bring about mental and spiritual transformation leading to free and moral beings who show extreme love for all others (The Mother, 1977a, 1977b). Jiddu Krishnamurti asserted the role of education for the oneness of humanity, flowering in inner goodness (freedom, self-realisation, and consciousness), and building individual responsibility to create a better society (Krishnamurti 1981, 2000, 2013), whilst Rabindranath Tagore emphasised education of feelings, self-awareness, oneness with others and nature, self-realisation, love for humanity, freedom, and creativity (Mukherjee, 2017; O'Connell, 2003; Tagore, 1929).

Notions of education for social change rely on education's potential to bring about (social, cultural, structural, and ecological) peace and justice. The thinkers emphasise engagement in social change making processes, emancipation of

oneself from various forms of social conditioning, and countering sociocultural and systemic violence. Gandhi emphasised positive peace and differentiated it from negative peace: "elimination of wars, absence of conflicts between classes, castes, religions and nations is a negative sense of peace, and love, rest, mental equilibrium, harmony, co-operation, unity, happiness are the positive indices of peace" (Gharse & Sharma, n.d.). Notably, Indian thinkers (Gandhi, 1968b; Krishnamurti, 2000; Tagore, 1929) believed that the oppressed and oppressors were inherently interconnected; wherein both, oppressor and oppressed, can form an unending vicious cycle of oppression, can be subjects of larger societal structures and systems of violence, and can be subjects of one's own conditioning. Therefore, they insisted on an education that promotes reflections on one's own conditioning and of larger social structures and called for an education that engaged both in creating a social change through ideas of universal brotherhood, kinship, and empathy, resonating with modern notions of active citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010).

These visions have informed Indian educational policies, curricular frameworks, teacher education programs, and inspired many schools and teachers across India and the world. The aforementioned Indian thinkers have set-up or informed several schools. They have also led to several international conferences, curricula, and movements on alternative pedagogies (summarised in table 1, page 13).

There are several papers that explore the philosophers' visions of education or how alternative schools have adopted these visions (Patel, 2023; Sibia et al., 2006; Thapan, 2006, 2018; Vittachi et al., 2007); however, there is a limited understanding of how teachers today conceptualise these ideologies and their importance in education. This paper aims to explore the question, what do teachers in alternative schools in India perceive as the purpose of education? This paper does not focus upon the aforementioned philosophers but rather on how teachers today perceive education and its purposes.

Methodology

This paper draws on a larger three-year-long, multiple embedded case study (Patel, 2020) which explored teachers' perceptions of the purpose of education, classroom practices they implemented, and the school-based systems that influenced them. The study sampled teachers (cases, the main units of analyses) within five alternative schools (sites) that were founded and set up by or inspired by Gandhi, Krishnamurti, Tagore, and Aurobindo. [**Table 2**, page 14, provides an overview of the five schools]

Methods

I spent 6-8 weeks at each of the sampled schools and had the opportunity to immerse myself in the context through participation in the activities, lives of the people, and physical environments of the sites to allow for the understanding of the schools, teachers, students and social beliefs and practices that are otherwise 'hidden' from public gaze. Every day I spent extended time at the schools and lived on school campuses when and where residential facilities were available.

This paper draws on data collected from a series of five semi-structured interviews with each of the 14 teachers, an extended semi-structured principal interview across each school, and ethnographic data collected in field notes. The teacher interviews captured a large range of data;

however, the current paper draws upon sections of the teacher interviews and their resultant themes that specifically probed: a) qualities of a 'good teacher'; b) perceived purpose of education; c) their conceptualisation of the school's philosophy; and d) perceptions of practices to bring about their perceived purpose of education. Similarly, the data from principal interviews draws specifically on the following questions: a) the school's educational vision; b) conceptualisations of local equivalents of education for harmony; and c) school wide strategies for materialising the schools' educational visions. I analysed the data using thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) via descriptive coding, latent level analyses, and (Stake, 1999) two-tiered multiple case study approach whereby a cross-case (within schools and aggregate) analysis was conducted after an intra-case analysis.

Context

India has many different types of schools, including government-run, government-aided (PB), and private (SF, MBK, RVS, and MGIS) schools. There are several subtypes of private schools, including low-fees private schools, trust (charity) run schools (SF and MBK), private (high-fees) schools (RVS), and international schools (MGIS). All of the sampled schools are alternative or experimental schools which have directly or indirectly been inspired by the aforementioned Indian thinkers (Vittachi et al., 2007). They follow limited government mandates related to teacher recruitment and curricula, except when close to the national assessment; grades 9–12, i.e., the last four years of schooling. The schools are located in different parts of India, inspired by different Indian thinkers, and use different languages as primary language of communication within the school (see table 2, page 14 for further details), however, all of them

are alternative schools that have been actively engaged in holistic education. There have been several drivers for alternative schooling in India, many arose as a result of the decolonization movement pre or immediately post-independence, while more recently many new alternative schools have come up due to dissatisfaction with mainstream education systems. Such schools have come up across the country with schools adhering to a different vision for education and pedagogical philosophy as compared to the mainstream schools. These alternative schools generally aim to be child-centric, inclusive, and have an explicit focus on a child's life-enriching needs, with many such schools also focusing on the development of spiritual values, identity, self-respect, and a sense of belonging (Thapan, 2018, 2006; Vittachi et al., 2007). Some of the schools (including the sampled schools) have been making a strong move to child- (self- and peer-) directed learning.

All the sampled schools maintain classroom sizes of 20-30 students except MBK, which has 8-10 students. The schools, except for RVS and MGIS, charge nominal fees. RVS does charge much higher fees, but this covers boarding and lodging facilities for the students. All schools sought to admit students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. All the schools are inclusive of students across different socio-economic and cultural borders. MGIS was a model school that was studied to set up the Right To Education act; RVS runs an active scholarship programme; MBK accepts students under the Right To Education act; PB has a large composition of children from local and rural areas; and SF runs an orphanage and provides these children free education. The schools do not base their admission decisions (some do not gather the information at all) on religious or caste background. However, this could potentially lead

them to replicate societal inequalities due to the intersectional nature of socioeconomic backgrounds, religion, and caste.

Despite the alternative aims, the sampled schools also do relatively well academically, being ranked as some of the best schools in the city (SF), the state (MGIS, PB), and the country (MBK, RVS). Parents sought admissions to these schools for a host of reasons and were not limited to their belief in the philosophers' ideologies, but also included, integrating nature and the built campus, the pedagogies, and the school's facilities. The schools' philosophy, reputation, and engaged/reflective parental bodies also lead to very well educated, proactive, and reflective teachers being recruited (an outline of teacher context is provided in **table 3**, page 15).

I sampled teachers that taught in the upper-primary/middle school (grades 5-8; with children aged 10-13 years) as children demonstrate exponential growth spurts of many cognitive skills during this period (Best & Miller, 2010; Veenman et al., 2004), reach adult levels of social sensitivity and actively use cognitive skills to manage their behaviours and potentially increasing importance of emotional pedagogy due to increased variations in students' cognitive and emotional development. The school principals were asked to recommend three to four class-teachers who practised the school philosophy and who had been associated with the school for at least two years. Where possible, a preference was given to sampling a teacher of each gender. [See **table 3, page 15**]

Purpose of education

Data analysis suggests that all teachers perceived education for harmony and its equivalents as the primary goal of education (the equivalents are

further discussed in the next section). I analysed the prevalence of the various codes and found that these resonated with the findings from the thematic analyses (i.e. the most frequently spoken about themes were also most strongly emphasised upon). The following themes emerged as the teachers' perceptions of purpose of education: education for harmony (52% codes), children's wellbeing (22% codes), holistic education (13% codes), knowledge (6% codes), finding one's interest (5% codes), career (1% codes), and other (1%) (summarised in Figure 1, page 17) I further discuss these in the next subsection in an ascending order of importance, starting with the least emphasised purpose of education going to the most emphasised one. This strongly contrasts with typical educational purposes envisioned within modern education.

Limited importance of education for a future career, academic learning, knowledge, and building interest

There was a limited emphasis on all of these themes. Career was only mentioned once (by Bharat) and that too in passing with an emphasis instead on 'the primary aim of education should be to develop your human qualities and human aptitudes'. While academic learning and knowledge acquisition as a goal had a wider spread of importance, ranging from not important to an essential primary goal. A few teachers described knowledge as something that was not relevant or important: "It doesn't matter; it is just a context that we engage with each other" ~Kamala and "We do not care about academics" ~Srila; while most discussed it as a secondary goal: "It's only a stepping stone to get to where I want to" ~Anju. And relatively few described it as important and a given: "The first one is how the children learn, because we are educators" ~Joona. The teachers that emphasised on knowledge

acquisition also emphasised other aspects, like education for harmony, wellbeing, and holistic learning. For example, Joona commented, "First of all, our school believes that the children should be very happy, it should be a very happy place… if the parents come and say that my child is happy, I also have the feeling that, okay, something (is working well)." While Aaditya described:

> Is my purpose in life to get through the exams and get a job and lead a comfortable life or have I come here with a specific purpose and [the purpose should be] to find the purpose of life? We often end up looking at very inconsequential things. Things that do not really matter. How does it matter, in the long run, whether I get this or that? How does it matter if I do not learn the rules of grammar? How does it matter, if my students are weak, let us say in maths or they do not remember history dates? What should be more important is whether they can look at their school and say because of that I am a better person. Because [of the school] I have learned how to locate myself.

This limited emphasis on instrumental vision of education i.e., education as a means to an end, resonates with the aforementioned Indian thinkers who provided a stark criticism of the modern education systems for sacrificing an holistic approach to education in favour of a narrow emphasis on literacy and numeracy (or more recently narrow sets of knowledge, competencies, and skills) as a means to serve a future economic engine (Gandhi, 1968a, 1968b; Krishnamurti, 2000; Tagore, 1929).

There were larger numbers of teachers (especially those at MGIS) who believed helping students find their interests as one of the purposes, which was referred to either as developing curiosity or finding one's passion. Curiosity was discussed in relation to inquisitiveness, not being closed to the world or certain topics, and having a drive to learn. Hema and Srila both commented on building an openness to any topic, while Bodhirupa discussed curiosity in terms of learning to learn, observe, and seek understanding. While finding one's passion, teachers discussed finding one's calling beyond academics. For example, "[The purpose of education] is to uncover I like this, I am good at this (and therefore they don't feel like they are) misfits who are walking in somebody else's shoes, and the shoes pinch" ~Anju; she further hoped that schools should help students experience Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) idea of flow:

> The experience of flow where you lose a perspective of time when kids are so engaged. We don't want a break. That is very important, that means you are happy doing this, you are connected with that thing.

Education for all round development and wellbeing

All teachers also referred to 'all round development', referring to thinking skills (creating, organising, and critical and creative thinking), soft skills (multitasking, articulating ideas, communicating them, negotiating, team working, and leadership skills), attitudes (towards subjects and other people), creativity (through hands or the mind; not limited to crafts or sports), and the development of a 'complete human being' (linking to ideas discussed below in holistic education for harmony). Some pursued these as an intrinsic

vision for education, while others highlighted the instrumental value of it. Interestingly, those that referred to the instrumental value didn't speak about it as a means of future gains to the individual, but rather as a means of instrumental value for inner renewal and social change. For example, Baren suggested that the purpose should be "to develop faculties (like the physical, mental, vital/emotional, and spiritual) that help facilitate manifestation of [spiritual] reality… See the higher inspiration comes to the [spiritual dimension of oneself], it's like a spark. But the spark cannot do anything unless the instruments are ready."

Children's wellbeing was considered as extremely important and was **forefronted** at all schools. The key themes that emerged included happiness or joy, freedom or lack of fear (which leads to freedom), a sense of acceptance or belonging, and satisfaction. There were a few references to other sentiments, including preventing depression and building confidence and self-esteem.

Happiness was the most significant theme; it was referred to as one of the most essential goals of education: Anju suggested "When we started the school, we have stated the two objectives to start in the school. We said the first objective is the child should be happy and the final objective is the child should be autonomous". Further discussion revealed that children's happiness was thought to be brought about by a) freedom – this referred to ideas of learning with *saradta* (ease and simplicity) and without pressure, notions of emancipation and becoming a free soul, and deconditioning (breaking away from various social conditioning); and b) acceptance and a sense of belonging-teachers frequently highlighted the need for ensuring that children are heard, valued, and cherished; Anita also suggested "If you are happy

and accepted, I think everything that you do will follow"; and c) learning to be free from fear and negative emotions: "How do you live without fear, greed, jealousy…" ~ Senior teacher at MBK. Resonating with Indian thinkers (Krishnamurti 2013, 2014), the notions of emancipation differ from Biesta's (2008), where teachers call for emancipation from one's own conditioning and emotional patterns, other imposed practices and beliefs (including those by parents and teachers), along with the larger societal power structures – and notably they call for both teachers and students to engage in their own processes and is brought about in an environment of equal relations.

Notably, teachers' understanding of wellbeing drew on much deeper forms of happiness rather than momentary pleasures and joys. Instead, they emphasized the importance of *'atmasantosh'* (contentment rising from the connection with one's soul), self-realization, and flow for such deep happiness. Teachers believed that such deeper forms of happiness stem not from momentary experiences or incidents but rather from a different way of living and being, wherein one is deeply connected to one's soul and (guided by the soul) works towards contributing to the larger world.

Holistic education for harmony as the primary goal of education

The most discussed purpose of education was education for harmony, flowering in inner goodness, a good human being, of the heart, spirit, and/or psychic education, depending on the school's context and philosophies. Teachers used different phrases depending on local contexts and personal backgrounds, albeit largely synergetic. All teachers held that various 'education for harmony'

equivalents were a primary goal of education. Many of them commented that it was '*swabhavik'* (while an exact translation is not available it can be roughly translated to mean a given that does not need to be stated, and something that they perceived as a natural way of living and being, much like breathing). Teachers commonly stressed that 'real education develops the heart and the spirit'.

Teachers understood the various local equivalents to refer to notions of compassion, kindness, care leading to meaningful and compassionate engagement with oneself, others and the larger world, 'living a truly sustainable life', 'good / wholesome human beings', and 'harmonious living' (summarised in table 4, page 16). Further investigation (Patel, 2021) revealed that teachers conceptualised education for harmony as entailing a discovery of oneself, of others and the larger world across (further discussed below). These put together would allow education to achieve Krishnamurti's (2014) vision of education that "awakens the inner intelligence so that the person may flower in goodness".

It is important to note that teachers believed that education for harmony (leading to transformation of one's ways of living and being) could only be brought about by holistic education. Internationally, holistic education has been proposed to include different ideas: a) various aspects of a person (all "parts of a person"); b) a person as a whole (not educating an assimilation of parts); and c) the whole person within a larger whole (with an emphasis of the situatedness of a person in a larger interconnected world- human, nature, and universe). Teachers called for the latter two; they reiterated that the common maxim of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Patel, 2023). They criticised the reductionist

nature of mainstream education systems for training individual parts of a person separately, for example, training the body is brought about through sports and physical education, cultivation of the heart through sessions on value and moral education and social emotional learning, and education of the brain through academic sessions. Instead, they advocated an integrated learning process for the whole person (including the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual). This bears a strong resonance with Miller's (2010) vision for holistic education. This entailed, both, specific, targeted education of individual aspects/parts of oneself (with equal weightage being given to each), and an integrated education where education is considered for the whole person (all aspects are trained together).

Teachers, aligning with various Indian thinkers (notably Tagore's emphasises on nature-based education, see Forbes 2000) and indigenous education scholars (Cajete, 1999; Darroch-Lozowski, 2018; and Four Arrows, 2018), further emphasised the importance of developing an understanding of the interconnected world that one is situated in. Teachers believed that students should not be separated from community spaces, and natural environments such as forests, leading to deep immersion and meaningful interactions. The schools were situated within nature, where students are in constant interaction with the nature around them; furthermore school based systems, pedagogies and heutagogy further deepened the engagement with the larger world including practices like regular outdoor teaching, walking through the nature filled schools to access different buildings, treks – silent walks – and bird watching, regular community engagement through camps, visits, data collection and through sessions by community members, and social action projects being embedded within every

module. This approach to education as **learning with and from nature** resonates with the various indigenous scholars (Cajete 1994, 1999; and Four Arrows, 2018) and is in stark contrast with approaches to **learning about nature** (Patel and Ehrenzeller, 2023; Ehrenzeller and Patel, 2024).

It is important to note that the schools were not structured centres of learning for children but rather as learning spaces for everyone, spaces for experimenting with different ways of living and being, and spaces for community living. This allows for all stakeholders engaging in constant learning, unlearning and relearning, equal relations, a lived experience based pedagogy and heutagogy, and embodied education.

Teachers' understanding of education for harmony equivalents

A non-definable concept

There was a strong notion that ideas of education for harmony cannot be put in words and that 'It cannot be said, it has to be felt'. There were ideas of a) the moment it is articulated it ceases to be what it is. For example, one senior non-participant teacher described "Silence is what it is. The moment you speak about it, it isn't silence", while Srila suggested that "The more you speak about it, the more you mentalise it, then it stops being the psychic. So [it] cannot really be spoken about but just has to be lived." There were also ideas of b) there is no need for a definition, because one actually knows what it means: "you do not have to define what a brother is, you just have to say this person feels like a brother to me and the idea is communicated straight away, which to me means that inside us we already know what this is, so you do not need the definition" ~Atul. And c) there is a need to practise these rather than talk about

them: "teachers do not say these words, but they really try to live [by these ideas]" ~Baren. However, Atul suggested the need for articulation, or at least narrative descriptions when saying:

> The reality is obviously something in itself, but it can be expressed in words, and it can be communicated… otherwise we get into this trap of... the truth is not communicable and then what are you doing here [as a teacher]? And this communication that the 'truth is incommunicable', where did that come from? That should be an incommunicable truth too.

This hesitation to define what education for harmony and its various equivalents can also be seen in the Indian thinkers' writing (Gandhi 1968a, Krishnamurti, 2000). While there were attempts to try and describe close approximates of these ideas (The Mother 1977a, Tagore 1962), across all educational thinkers there was an emphasis on teachers engaging in deep reflection, experiencing the ways of living and being, and building their own understanding of the ideas (Krishnamurti, 2013).

A broad umbrella-like term

Due to the resistance with defining education for harmony and its equivalents, it was treated as an umbrella-like term that encompassed several ideas (discussed in the next subsection). This resonates with the aforementioned Indian thinkers, who also treated education for harmony as broad objectives, and with international researchers and practitioners working on education of the heart or LTLT and their treatment of the terms as broad umbrella-like terms (Sinclair, 2013). Although this can lead to fuzzy

conceptualisation without clear aims and targets and difficulty in translating to practise, teachers described that it was designed to avoid 'piecemeal efforts' and to bring about education for harmony as a form of lived experience. It prevented any 'fragmented' or prescriptive efforts of developing a specific subject, expectations of linear learning trajectory, and pursuits of quantitative measurement. This resonates with Krishnamurti (2000, 2013) who called for constant questioning of oneself and cautioned against fragmentation and one-size fits all approaches. Teachers believed that education for harmony is a non-linear journey; every individual has a different journey, and it cannot be reduced to a number.

> (Like education for harmony) there is no definition of art and creativity; over here, the purpose is to activate the senses. The moment you define creativity you are delimiting individuals and the community too. By giving a definition of creativity actually you are limiting the notion of creativity. We just can't fix a parameter and then start doing it. We have to let it be (and an understanding develops) with the time (and for each child). I think that's important for me personally; I don't define, I don't want a fixed aim, a [singular] objective, or a structured position. ~Shreya

Such a position strongly embodies ideas of an educator pursuing education (for harmony) as a 'live enquiry' for themselves (Krishnamurti 2013), making them lifelong learners and forging equal relations with students (Thapan, 2001).

Key ideas underpinning education for harmony

Despite there not being a definition, teachers shared narrative descriptions of education for harmony. While teachers used different phrases, they were largely synergetic. Highlighting problems of language and cultural differences, The Mother, (1977a), suggested:

> One[1] clothes the ideal or the absolute, which one[1] seeks to attain, with different names according to the environment in which he is born and the education he has received. The experience is essentially the same, if it is sincere; it is only the words and phrases in which it is formulated that differ according to the belief and the mental education of the one who has the experience.

Teachers' key ideas of education for harmony are summarised in table 4. Patel (2021) developed a 2-dimensional, conceptual framework, with three domains (discovery of the self, others and the world) that were intersected by six dimensions (awareness, empathetic relations, sense of purpose, change in perspective, compassionate action, and meaningful engagement).
[See **Table 4, Page 16**]

A pursuit of way of harmonious living and being vs gathering knowledge or developing competencies

Many international movements like SEL, LTLT, and GCE have emphasised upon either building a knowledge set or developing skills / competencies

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[1] The original quote used the word 'man' instead of 'one'.

that one can draw upon (Chernyshenko et al., 2018; OECD, 2015, 2018; Oxley & Morris, 2013; Trier, 2002). However, unlike them education for harmony was referred to as a pursuit of a different way of living and being. It goes beyond understanding facts, or abilities/skills to naturally living differently. Teachers highlighted that given it's a pursuit of a different way of living and being it needs to be a continuous process of refining one's ways of living and being 24*7 rather than intermittently, over short durations of time. This contrasts with modern LTLT, GCE, and a few SEL interventions which have developed a specific subject or integrated certain aspects across the curricula (Patel, 2023). Teachers emphasised education for harmony results from ethos and lived experiences, and therefore created spaces and opportunities for students to engage and dialogue with each other and the larger community, sought teachable moments that resulted from everyday interactions, and maintained detailed qualitative behavioural reports for each child. It is also important to note that educators themselves were engaged in processes of learning to live together harmoniously; for example, Srila[MBK] suggested "The day I stop learning and growing inwards I will stop coming to the school". This pursuit of a different way of living and being for themselves is one of the key tenets proposed by The Mother (1977a) and Krishnamurti (2013); notably it allows for building an environment of lifelong and equal relations within all stakeholders at the schools.

Furthermore, teachers believed that there are no pre-set answers or a singular path (Krishnamurti, 2000, 2013) and instead believed that a continuous individualised exploration will lead to a more nuanced understanding, open new planes of complexity, and transcension from pursuit of outcomes to pursuit of processes. This idea of a

pursuit of a different way of living and being also resonates with several international thinkers, including Lange (2004), who called for transformative learning theories and suggested that the understanding of interconnectedness between oneself, the wider community, and nature needs to be integrated in epistemological processes (changes in worldview) and ontological ones (changes in ways of being). Similarly, it also resonates with Cajete (1994), who called for holistic education and described indigenous education to revolve around changes in ways of living and being by focusing on establishing and maintaining relationships with oneself, the community or tribe, and physical place/space.

Conclusion

Globally, there is a growing interest in broader purposes of education with SDG 4.7, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers demonstrating interest in synergetic concepts like education for sustainable development (UN General Assembly Resolution, 2015), LTLT (Delors et al., 1996; UNESCO, 2014b), peace education, SEL (CASEL, 2003; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007), and GCE (UNESCO, 2014a). However, very little is known about these southern philosophies of education for harmony equivalents and how teachers in today's day and age conceptualise and understand these philosophies. The paper captures teachers' voices, their perceptions of the purpose of education, and their conceptualizations of education for harmony, which potentially encompasses LTLT, peace education, SEL, and GCE.

This paper finds that teachers in alternative schools in India perceive education for harmony as a primary purpose of purpose. Other studies (Thapan, 2006; Vittachi et al., 2007) that have studied the sampled schools have also noted their alternative purposes and practices of education.

The teachers' vision for education had very little emphasis on its material returns (career, economic), with there being much more emphasis on deep satisfaction (*atmasantosh*) and inner happiness as a continued lived reality, as opposed to experiences of short-spanned happiness. The findings suggest that teachers' understanding of education for harmony extends the wellbeing and ethics of care discourses (Noddings, 2002) to include aspects like compassion, gratitude, and spiritual understanding of the self. And it similarly extends SEL, peace education, and LTLT discourses by including ideas of deep satisfaction and happiness stemming from inner peace and harmony. These lead to approaching education for harmony as a way of living and being rather than as gathering knowledge or as a skill, and therefore pursuing it as a continuum of lived experiences rather than commonly proposed practices of implementing a curriculum or running specific classes for SEL, GCE, and LTLT.

The results suggest teachers believed in the intrinsic value of education, rather than the instrumental purpose of preparing students for future careers. This resonates with Brighouse & Unterhalter (2010) and K. Kumar (2010), who recommend education should be provided for its own sake, referring to ideas of wellbeing and agency rather than its future instrumental value and future returns. The findings also include a notion of education contributing to inner renewal and social change, thus suggesting a more nuanced perception of the purposes of education, including both intrinsic and instrumental aspects. The teachers made a further distinction, whereby education for harmony was considered as a purpose, rather than a set goal or a set process.

They commonly explained how there is neither a predetermined goal nor a single path, but rather, a guiding purpose that leads to multiple paths, depending on students' backgrounds and interests.

The teachers, much like various aforementioned Indian thinkers, adopted a holistic epistemology, which underpinned all their philosophies and approaches to education. This is reflected in multiple aspects including: a) approaches to educating the whole child (who is situated in an interconnected world), rather than education of separate parts of an individual; b) pursuit of education for harmony as a way of living and being 24*7, and importantly one that is underpinned by process-oriented approach; c) understanding education for harmony as engaging in inner renewal within oneself and wider global social change (and their understanding of the interconnectedness between oneself and the world); d) a hesitation to define the concepts in an effort to avoid 'piecemeal efforts', 'fragmented', or prescriptive efforts, and instead pursue education (for harmony) as a live enquiry for themselves and the children; e) their approach to their own lives and pursuit of non-anthropocentric epistemologies and ways of living and being; and f) emphasis on embodied and experiential learning, whereby students learn through interactions and experiences within the world around them. The emphasis on education for harmony and its pursuit of it through holistic education is crucial to emerging discourses and practices on holistic education and SEL. This small-scale project provides a novel perspective and can help contribute a novel approach to meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 on education for sustainable development

Tables

Table 1: Summary of the impact of Indian educationists who emphasised education for harmony equivalents

Thinker	Life span	Key educational ideas	Key texts	Impact
Mahatma Gandhi	Oct 1869-Jan 1948	Education of head, heart, & hands Spiritual training & character education Empathy, equality & tolerance Self-governance	(Gandhi, 1968a, 1968b)	Informs national curricular framework. Experimented at a few initial schools. Set up Gujarat Vidyapeeth (university). *Nai Taleem* movement. *Buniyadi shalas*.
His Holiness Dalai Lama	Jul 1935 -	Education of the heart. Mindfulness Oneness of humanity (shared humanity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of everyone) Understanding emotions, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, & tolerance	(Dalai Lama, 2015; Dalai Lama et al., 2009)	Informs central Tibetan administration run schools. Curricular development through Social Emotional Ethics and Ayur Gyan Nyas.
Aurobindo Ghose and Mirra Alfassa	Aug 1872 – Dec 1950 Feb 1878 – Nov 1973	Education of the psychic Mental and spiritual transformation Free and moral beings that love all	(The Mother, 1977b, 1977a)b	Informs national curricular framework. Chain of schools across India.
Jiddu Krishna-murti	May 1895 – Feb 1986	Flowering in inner goodness. Oneness of humanity, Deconditioning & questioning societal structures Inner flowering (freedom, self-realisation, and consciousness)	(Krishnamurti, 1981, 2000, 2013)	Informs national curricular framework. Set up and inspired a chain of schools (including a school in UK and another in US). Inspired activity-based learning movement.
Rabindra-nath Tagore	May 1861 – Aug 1941	Education of the spirit and education for wholesome human being. Education of feelings (Bodhersadhāna) Self-realisation Oneness with humanity and nature Freedom, creativity, questioning societal structures, & self-governance	(Tagore, 1929, 1962)	Informs national curricular framework. Set up Shantiniketan, Sriniketan, and Vishwabharati (university).

Table 2: School context

School name (approximate number of students)	Brief description	Founding year	Location
Mahatma Gandhi International School (MGIS; with 300 students)	An international school (International Baccalaureate; Kindergarten-12) that has adopted Gandhian philosophies.	1998	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
Mirambika Free Progress School (MBK; with 100 students)	A free progress school (no exams, students progress at their own pace, no board affiliation; grades 1-8) inspired by Aurobindo Ghose and Mira Alfassa	1981	Delhi
Patha Bhavana (PB; with 1200 students)	A school (grades 1-12) set up by Rabindranath Tagore that follows the state board curricula.	1901	Santiniketan, West Bengal
Rishi Valley School (RVS; with 400 students)	A boarding school (grades 4-12) set up by Jiddu Krishnamurti that follows the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education board curricula.	1926	Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh
Shreyas Foundation (SF; with 800 students)	A Montessori school (Kindergarten-grade 12) that has adopted Gandhi and Tagore's philosophies and follows the state board curricula.	1947	Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Table 3: Teacher context

Teacher name	School	Gender (Age range)	Roles	Teaching experience	Subjects taught
Baren Roul	MBK	Male (40-50)	Teacher	20-30	All
Kamala Menon	MBK	Female (60-70)	Teacher, ex-principal	30-40	Social Science
Srila Basu	MBK	Female (60-70)	Teacher	30-40	Science
Jayanthi Ramachandran	MBK	Female	Principal		
Anita Shah	MGIS	Female (50-60)	Teacher, ex-coordinator	20-30	All but primarily English
Hemali Choksi	MGIS	Female (40-50)	Teacher	10-20	All but primarily English
Joona Sheel	MGIS	Female (50-60)	Teacher, coordinator	10-20	All but primarily Science
Anju Musafir	MGIS	Female	Principal		
Aaditya Ghosh	PB	Male (50-60)	Teacher	20-30	English
Surojit Sen	PB	Male (50-60)	Teacher, coordinator	20-30	English
Shreya Mukherjee	PB	Female (30-40)	Teacher	10-20	Arts and crafts
Bodhirupa Sinha	PB	Female	Principal		
Atul Vij	RVS	Male (50-60)	Teacher	<10	Science
Anonymous teacher	RVS	Anonymized	Teacher	20-30	Anonymized
V. Santharam	RVS	Male (60-70)	Teacher	20-30	Social sciences
Tanuj Shah	RVS	Male (50-60)	Teacher, coordinator	20-30	Maths
Jyothi Anantha	RVS	Female	Principal		
Bharat Shah	SF	Male (50-60)	Teacher, ex-coordinator	30-40	Science
Arti Trivedi	SF	Female	Principal		

Table 4: Teachers' conceptualizations of education for harmony and its equivalents

| Conceptualisation	Teachers	Key concepts	Indian educational thinkers
Education of the heart	Teachers across contexts (except RVS); more frequently older teachers and principals	Deep understanding of oneself, inner peace, simple living, being free and not pressurised (societal or peer), experiencing happiness and joy, developing values, being empathetic and compassionate, becoming a better human being, and harmonious and inclusive living.	Gandhi, The Dalai Lama
Education of the spirit or psychic	All MBK teachers	Peaceful and harmonious living, emotional regulation, spiritual understanding of the self/soul, deep satisfaction (*'atmasantosh')*, balance between the inner and outer world (*'samta'*), sensitivity, awareness of beauty, cooperation in nature, non-judgemental respectful relations, oneness with everyone around, community living, and contributing to society	Aurobindo
Education for inner flowering	All RVS teachers	Critical inquiry and reflections as means of better understanding oneself, harmonious living, and breaking away from conditioning and divisive frameworks; leading to sensitivity and 'sensibilities', selflessness and egolessness, kindness, and care and compassion to others.	Krishnamurti
Education for wholesome/ better human being	All teachers generically referred to both, while education for wholesome human being was specifically used in PB	Developing values, critically analysing one's own self, behavioural and emotional regulation, responding as opposed to reacting, being open and sensitive to others, accepting others, compassion, and a feeling of oneness with all of humanity and community living.	(Tagore, 1962)) coined 'wholesome human being'

Figures

Figure 1
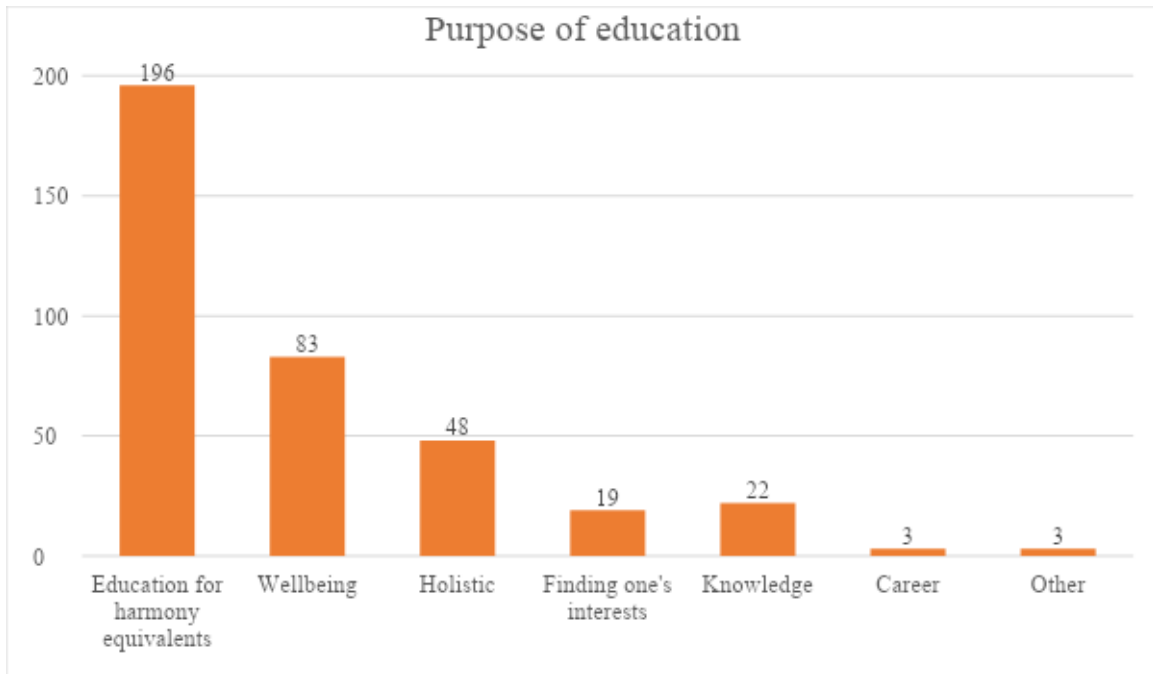
Figure 1: Purposes of education. Represents the frequency of coding for the various purposes of education that the teachers discuss.

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