One has to fight the suffocating smoke from the lorry traffic and the pungent smell from the industries' chimneys to reach Vikasana. But miraculously, as one gets nearer to the centre, the pollution gives way to fresh air. The sound of the lorries fades, the smoke from the chimneys recedes and all that is visible is a dense cluster of trees. In spite of being in the midst of a rapidly growing industrial area in Bangalore, Vikasana has managed to maintain its tranquillity.

Living up to its name Vikasana, which means blossoming, is a centre that strives to create an ideal environment for the growth of the child’s mind. MC Malati started Vikasana as a place where education is enjoyable, and a child is allowed to learn at his or her own pace with no comparison or competition. The larger idea is also to provide children who don’t have the means access to education. After being trained by noted educationist David Horsburgh, Malati set up Vikasana 29 years ago. “It is because of him that I had the courage to start this school,” she says. True to David Horsburgh’s philosophy this centre is peace personified.

What is Vikasana?
Vikasana is a rural centre of education that provides free education to children of all ages from the surrounding villages. It is a learning space that the village children can come to for as long as they desire. Children learn by doing and through participation in activities. There is a great emphasis on care of the environment, nurturing one’s space and interests, working with one’s hands and self-directed learning. “The child’s learning is facilitated and then allowed to proceed at its own pace without fear. There is total freedom to take time, to explore, decipher and learn. Many spaces are created for both adults and children to learn,” says Malati.

Before circumstance forced Vikasana to accept a minimal amount as fees, it had followed a no-fee policy. “For the past two years we have been taking Rs. 200 due to some water problem. Sometimes, well-to-do parents also send their children to our school; they help us in kind or sometimes by giving us money,” says Malati. Help also comes from organisations like the Neel Bagh Trust and the Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA), Bangalore.

Activities at the centre
The activities at the centre range from gardening to constructing buildings! Life at the centre starts at 8:45 am with children watering the plants or cleaning the classrooms. After this, children from all age groups get together for a session of singing or story telling. The children are taught songs in different languages such as Kannada, English, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, French, German and Italian. At about 10 a.m. the children begin their academic work.

It is fascinating to watch the teachers work with their students. Each teacher has about ten students from different age groups working with her. The child picks what s/he wants to study that day and the teacher facilitates this learning process. The teacher makes sure she spends time with each child individually. In this manner, apart from gaining individual attention from the teacher, the child’s decision-making ability is nurtured. “We have 30 children from different backgrounds. We are two teachers and have no strict rules; we work on holidays, children and parents too are excited about this,” says Malati.

Children are also taught to learn how things work: if they do not know about something the teachers and students work together towards finding the answers. “The teachers work hard with the children so that they do not say ‘I don’t know,’” says Malati. “The child has to learn to value everything. Even a broomstick – the child has to learn to utilise it in more than one way,” she adds.

As the day comes to an end, children spend their time making things using their hands. Pottery, sewing, clay modelling, sometimes even building small structures with bricks and cement! A small play home on the campus was built by students. The idea behind this centre is to emphasise self-learning, and the environment created in Vikasana is appropriate for this.

One problem that the teachers as well as the children face is that parents do not take as much interest in their child’s education as they perhaps should. “They believe everything has to happen at the school. But most well-off parents’ demands are always higher. We keep insisting that they
come and spend some time with their children and see how they are working. Sometimes some mothers come, but the men are always busy,” says Malati.

**Examination at Vikasana**

Although the school is not structured towards preparing the children to take certifying examinations, Vikasana provides ample encouragement to students who are interested in taking government level exams at the 7th standard and SSLC. Other help by way of coaching or enrolling them as private candidates in a government school is also given. Children who do not wish to sit for such exams are encouraged to develop their other talents locally or at other voluntary organisations in Bangalore such as the Aurobindo Ashram or Mrichakatika.

The one question that everyone asks of an alternative school is: *Are children able to cope with the outside world when they get out of school?* “They do,” comes a prompt reply! “There are children who have become business men, some of them have come back to school to teach and others are teaching in other schools. There is one chartered accountant, some software engineers, a nurse.”

Issues in education have been discussed and debated for a long time; but only some dare to take these discussions seriously and provide space for alternative education. Vikasana is one such school. Vikasana has been engaged in providing an alternative educational space for more than 29 years. It can and has been used as an example to show that alternative forms of education also have a place in our world where mainstream, syllabus-bound schooling holds the monopoly.

This article by Meghana Rao first appeared in Teacher Plus in February 2008, and has been reprinted here.

**Tags:** space, alternative, Education, Freedom, creative, school