

BALA LAKSHYA JYOTHI

(Lighting up Children's future)

Issue: Eleven

Quarterly Newsletter from RELIEF FOUNDATION

August, 2017

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A Message from the Chairperson

Dear champion friends of Relief Foundation,

We have crossed a milestone in installing a candidate who successfully completed orientation in Montessori practices (Tamil as medium) and entered the Montessori classroom in our Jamunamarathur centre. This has not only enthused us on the strength of our conviction but our faith and belief in humanity changing because of children.

We are approaching yet another milestone in putting together a plan for a permanent centre in Gummidipoondi which is functioning now in a rented premises.

We hope and wish that our endeavours will capture your hearts to release your wishes and open your purse strings to support us. Each step we take is with the confidence of the hand holding of all the well-wishers in our list.

We hope that you will find this newsletter interesting and will send us your feedback on its contents and also spread the word among your circle of relatives and friends about your work.

Best wishes till we meet next!

Vidya Shankar,
Chairperson

RF News

Updates from *CASCADE* Montessori Rural Resource Centres

Jamunamarathur Centre

Toddler Children:

The centre was closed for a couple of weeks in the month of May for vacation. In the final 10 days of the month, the adults were involved in material making while the elder ones in the morning were left on their own to work on already shown work. It was an interesting period of observation for the adults. The children had to explore with already known materials and it gave them newer learnings. One such highlight was when a child realised that rotating an inset of any shape, resulted in an imaginary circle along the periphery.

The months of June and July saw a steady attendance from the children, thus helping them to settle into their work cycles comfortably. Notably, the post lunch afternoon sessions which used to be moody and playful, became much more settled and serious in these months. This was an ideal time for older children to be presented with longer work, which they could follow up on their own in the next morning session. Matching the entire set of Geometric cards, collecting dried

leaves and making a leaf album, building the Decanomial square, creating own land and water forms with a little spade in the outdoors were some of the eye catching work that became a norm in the afternoons.

It was also interesting to observe that even if the children were left to play post lunch, beyond 15-20 minutes, they automatically went back to the classroom for some work. It showed how important they considered the work inside was! This natural urge to learn and engage in a meaningful activity showed the development of Will in the little ones.

Two of the children (one old and one new) who come from 3 or more kilometres away are now coming by a private shared auto/van to the centre. This has been an encouraging sign as for the first time parents slightly far off have taken initiative to make sure their children utilise the Centre regularly.



Tuition Children:

The tuition sessions restarted in the month of June with 10 Children. The regular schedule was followed with focus on English for half the time spent during the week and on other areas for the remaining half. The children during these months were given the foundation required for them to acquire reading skills. Those who were already capable of reading were given further practice through the materials in Casa.

The sessions began to stretch late in the night, sometimes until 8:00 pm and it was getting really difficult for the adults to settle in early for the night. As a result, the tuition sessions were rescheduled to target government school children between 4:30 and 6:00 pm. This reduced the number of students by 60%, but turned out to be unavoidable. The older children were welcomed to join on Saturdays when we work on other areas.

The children during this time apart from the regular schedule, were involved in collage work, gardening and painting during the Saturdays. We are also in touch with a local Government school as part of our outreach programme. We have started with meeting the first and second standard children. We will keep you posted on our plan and updates about this in our next issue of this newsletter.



Materials and Training:

The materials meant for Mathematics which were already purchased were finally ready to be displayed by mid-June. This also included the culture materials like Land and Water forms, more Puzzle maps, etc. The children were excited to see the newer materials, though they realised that they would be shown the same in stages.

Apart from this, higher Culture and Language materials are still in the process of being made. The adult and the children's assistant have been working on the same during the weekday evenings and on Saturdays.

Constant discussions and sharing of ideas, especially with the presence of two adults in the classroom has been a boon. This helps to understand and reinforce the deeper currents that run within a Montessori environment with much greater clarity. During one such discussion, children's behaviour with and without the presence of either of the

adults was discussed in detail. This helped to provide insights on the possible reasons as to why Children behaved differently under different situations.

Parent Sessions:

The parent sessions which didn't happen in the Month of May restarted in June. While one of the sessions was more general and covered basic administrative topics, rules and good practices followed, the remaining sessions were more focused on a variety of issues like:

- Why children speak loudly?
- Why do children exhibit violent behaviour at times?
- Prizes and Competition
- What does a child expect?

While covering the topics, there were moments of self-introspection among the parents. One was about how they overspent money because they felt the time spent with the child was less. City parents too could easily relate to this. By doing that parents tried to substitute their inability to spend time with money which later became the norm. This did not sit well with them. These points of introspection and openly admitting it showed that our parents were and are in

the path of progression. These were and are wonderful first few steps covered towards becoming an aware and conscious parent.



Agricultural Update:

During these months, just before the onset of rains, around 75 more saplings were planted within the campus. These were mostly border timber crops like Teak, Vilwam and Malai Vembu. The remaining were a mixed variety of flowering and medicinal plants. Ten pomegranate saplings were also planted.

We welcomed a new staff member, Mr. Viswanathan, in June. Henceforth, he will be monitoring the agricultural activities. The land, under his supervision was tilled once to prime it up for planting more fruit trees. The compost pits were also revamped to have more space for maneuvering the waste efficiently. The waste collection from the hotels continues every day. With the onset of monsoon on the hills, the next quarter could be a busy time on the field.

Challenges Faced:

Problem:

- The local schools increased the timing at school for a further 15 minutes and this resulted in the sessions extending sometimes even till 8:00 pm.
- The children going by auto leave only by 4:00 pm. With only two coming by private vehicle, it has been tough to bargain with the drivers to pick them up by 3:00 pm.

Solution:

- We have started an outreach programme in which one of the adults visit the nearby Forest Department school and work with children of first and second standard particularly focusing on their language skills (reading and writing). We will slowly increase our outreach students
- We are planning to approach the parents of children who go to balwadi to use the centre in the evening starting around 3.30 and go up to 5.30PM. This will also solve the second problem as the helper will stay until the children leave along with the adult to take care of the children who leave by 4.00PM. We are also talking to the driver to pick the children by 3.30PM itself.

Awareness and Outreach Programs:

Kodai Vizha:

The 'Kodai Vizha' or the Summer festival was held at Jamunamaruthur on 17th and 18th of June 2017. A stall was not available on the first day as almost all the stalls were allotted to government organisations. A banner which was worn like a cape, albeit on the front, served as an attraction enough for the adults to talk to at least 50 people. On Day 2, there were few unused stalls and hence a small setup with some of the materials on display was arranged. We also put up handmade posters carrying photos of our children at work.



The stall saw a footfall of close to 100 people during the day. It was interesting to see that everyone young or old was intrigued by the materials. The Binomial Cube, which was one of the materials, had

a busy day being dismantled and rebuilt. The Tiruvanamalai Collector, who patiently went through all the stalls, also had a go at the Binomial Cube sometime in the afternoon. All in all reaching out to so many people across all age groups over the two days was really satisfying.



Elementary School:

We are beginning a new outreach activity in the nearby school. A small mobile library will be organized at the Forest Middle school in Jamunamarathur on every Friday for the 1st and 2nd standard children from the month of August. The talks with the local

Headmistress has been fruitful and it is also beneficial to close to 30 children who are part of the mentioned classes.

Case Study:

Praveen (Name Changed)

4 years 5 months

Male, Jamunamarathur

Praveen enrolled at our Centre way back in June 2015. Initially, he used to find it very difficult to be away from his mother who faithfully accompanied him for almost a whole year. Later he was accompanied by his younger brother from late 2016. Since then the elder one became surprisingly dependent on the younger one. He would always leave if his brother cried or left. His irregularity in attending the centre was also a contributing factor.

But the last six months have seen a sea of change. The parents moved their house closer to the centre (in fact just on the same lane). The brothers on several days have walked together to school in the morning, on their own. Praveen, on several occasions stayed back to be with a friend who left late and let his brother leave early. Even within the classroom, there's a visible change in helping the younger ones and clarity in choosing his own work. He hardly took any days off in the recent

quarter and in fact has come to the centre on a couple of days when his younger brother was ill.

Voice of the Parent:

M. Sameera (Name Changed)
Female, Jamunamarathur
Housewife

"One of the main reasons why I enrolled my son in CASCADE was for him to learn to take care of himself and the environment well. I should say that I am really happy with his progress so far. He takes care of himself so much not to spill while eating. He helps me to clean the house willingly as well. Something that I've noticed is that while children studying in other schools play like my children, these two (indicating her two sons) make sure that whatever they use is put back in their places appropriately. Be it left over soap, spilled water or play things, they take care of it themselves without any need to supervise them."

Vallambudukuppam Centre

Casa (Toddler & Primary):

As of now, there are totally 15 children in the centre. The new academic year began in June. Apart from 10 children who continue from last year, 7 new children

joined this year. We expect more new children to join. Admissions happen throughout the year.

As it is a mixed age group, children from last year or the year before are role models for the new entrants. It is interesting to see how the young ones follow what the older ones say and do. They also learn in that process and prepare themselves to become role models in future.

Weekly twice they go for nature walks along with the adult. As reported earlier in this column of the newsletter, nature walks help children to connect with nature. They also learn a lot of new names of leaves, flowers, birds, insects and many more. Movement being one of the characteristics of the first plane child, they love nature walks.

Older ones continue to plan for their day by choosing work from the list of presentations they have received so far, the young ones are learning to plan for their day with little help from either the adult or the assistant in the environment.



Tuition:

We recently changed our evening class timings in this centre to 5.30PM to facilitate children from Government schools who reach home a bit late and also to provide the much needed gap for the adult. Tuition classes happen between 5.30pm and 7.30PM on all the weekdays.

There are about 12 children now who come regularly to the classes. About 3 children who have completed 6 years of

age and spent 2 years with us have joined the nearby government school. They are continuing to come in the evening. As they are well versed in using the Montessori material, they start with some of the material directly with little or no help from the adult. Apart from practical life activities, there are other areas like language, geography and maths wherein children can continue to use the material. But their approach with the same material will now be different as they are in the second plane of development. The adult is well aware of this development and uses the material appropriately to help the children look at concepts differently. We have also received positive feedback from the Government school teachers about our children who have joined in their school.

Training for Assistant

Our centres have been aimed towards promoting rural entrepreneurship. Every member of the family is involved in running the centre. We are extremely happy to say that Mr. Parandaman's (Vallambudukuppam centre director) wife has become an assistant in the classroom. She was given a rigorous orientation on various aspects of being an assistant in classroom. The orientation covered, including but not limited to, the following:

- Planes of development

- How to offer help
- How to observe

She has become an active member in running the centre. Her experience in classroom with children is the best training that she could ever receive from anyone.

Study circle and parents meeting:

Apart from regular study circles, we also had a meeting on August 2nd 2017. The meeting had to be postponed to August due to non-availability of some of the parents. About 15 parents took part in this meeting. Some of the points discussed in the meeting were:

- Admission and parents' role in propagating the centre
- Fee payment and non-payment issues
- Changes they noticed in children
- Visitors from France and activities planned (**Note:** We will report about this visit in the next issue of our newsletter)

Challenges

We initiate fund raising initiatives in every centre. The aim is to move towards self-sustenance in future. We recently planted several saplings of drumstick tree in the premises. As the fencing

around the campus was not intact, they were eaten by goats ☺. We have replanted them now and have fixed the fence as well.

Other initiatives

Outreach & Awareness Programmes

Apart from focusing on our project areas, we are also spreading childcare awareness and guidelines among parents in few other villages as well. We have also started to work with adolescent village girls and conduct periodical meetings in village sides. Our staff member Mr.Prasanna Bharathi is initiating these efforts in couple of villages of Thiruvannamalai District along with his wife Mrs. Unnamalai. He conducts periodical meetings for parents while his wife assists him in the meeting for adolescent girls.

On June 20th Meeting (2017) a parents awareness meeting was held in Thenkarumbalur village where 20 people participated. Most of them were mothers. We showed a Montessori video and had discussions based on the content of a pamphlet prepared by us. It was an interactive session. We thank the Self Help Group members who helped in arranging this meeting.



On June 23rd Meeting (2017) a follow-up meeting was held at Sadakuppam village where 15 adults participated. 4 adolescent girls voluntarily attended it to help the adults (as most of the adults have not completed middle school) to understand some aspects. In these meetings, we went through specific questionnaires prepared by us, to make the parents aware of certain aspects of child development and to also to make them to think from a different angle on child development. The questionnaire had a question with several options for them to choose from. The options were aimed towards giving different perspectives to one question.

On July 23rd Meeting (2017) a meeting was held in a new place in Thenkarumbalur village. 15 people attended this meeting with great interest as this was the first time they were ever approached on parenting topics. After giving a brief introduction about Maria Montessori philosophy as well as our organization, a Montessori video was shown. This meeting was highly interactive as some

participants (who are undergoing conventional teacher training course) raised many questions.

On 29th July Meeting (2017) an awareness meeting was held for adolescent girls on in Sadakuppam village. 14 adolescent girls participated very eagerly in this meeting and made it very interactive. It was coordinated by Mrs.Unnamalai. The girls expressed their interest to have such meetings in future too.



Story Book Publishing

We have successfully completed writing 30 stories in Tamil. We are waiting for a good publisher to publish them for children. If you are interested to help us in publishing it, please write to us @ relieffoundationindia@gmail.com

Teachers' Lab

Mr. Mani, who was undergoing training in working with 3-6 old children using Montessori philosophy, has successfully completed it. He has been posted as an adult in Jamunamarathur to work along with Mr. Harikumar. Mr. Mani will work there for 2-3 years before setting up his own centre.

Participation in International Geography Youth Summit

3 CASCADE Children, Ms. Vidya Shankar and Mr. Murali Krishnan travelled to Bengaluru in July (between 7th and 9th July 2017) to attend the International Geography Youth Summit organized by The Institute of Geographical Studies. Mr. Harikumar, centre director of Jamunamarathur, also joined us directly in Bengaluru. The whole event was mainly coordinated by Students whose hospitality had no parallel. Starting from welcoming the guests to taking care of seating arrangements, registrations, photography, lunch arrangement, water distribution and many more were handled by children, and in particular by the children of Army Public School, Bengaluru. Mr. Murali Krishnan presented a paper on Human Geography and how it is presented to children in Montessori method, while Ms. Vidya Shankar presented a paper on Montessori

Geography. Dr. Chandra Shekhar Balachandran, founder of The Institute of Geographical Studies, says this:

- Over 240 participants; 130 student participants (presenting various things from research to intervention designs, from #CitizenGeographerNeighborhood plans to innovative games)
- 20+ knowledgeable professionals presenting talks and workshops;
- 40+ volunteers helping with a myriad talks;
- 30+ staff of Army Public School, K Kamaraj Road, Bengaluru helping with logistical arrangements;
- 25+ teachers;
- Partners who helped to make it all come together;
- Audio and video documentarians;
- Rapporteurs...

It was a great opportunity for children. Please do follow the page The Institute of Geographical Studies for more future events.

Photographs:

<https://photos.google.com/.../AF1QipOceU-mnUIVOqCl7zhs8ucwPaa...> (Photo Courtesy: TIGS, Bengaluru)



Visitors

- Ms. Kushboo and her colleague from Mantra For Change, Bengaluru, visited us in May to know more about our work. The discussion was mainly focused on the journey of Relief Foundation in the past 19 years and how they could learn from it.
- 4 volunteers from HumaPharma, our partner organization in France, visited us in August 2017. This is the 2nd visit to India. They conducted sessions for parents, children and youth in

Jamunamarathur, Chennai and Vallambudukuppam. They have also helped in setting up a Youth Sports Club in Jamunamarathur. A detailed report on this visit will be given in the next issue of this newsletter.

Training for Teachers

Mr. Murali Krishnan gave an orientation to Government and Management teachers of Sathyamurthi High School, in T.Nagar, Chennai on National Curriculum Framework. The school is being run by Balamandir Kamaraj Trust. It was an interactive discussion with the teachers wherein several ideas and philosophy of Dr. Maria Montessori were discussed.

New Member

We are happy to welcome Mr. Sai Ghatti, who has joined us as a part time staff member from June 2017. He is helping us with accounts. He has over 30+ years of experience working in various companies at various positions.



How you can support us?

- ❖ Sponsor a family - towards cost of educating, mentoring a family with children attending our Montessori Rural Resource centres in one of our rural centres - Rs 20000/- per year

- ❖ Sponsor a child in our evening classes in rural areas @ Rs.10,000/- per year. These are children who finish 3 years of primary Montessori classes in our centres in the morning and join other schools to continue education. They use the facility in the evening and continue to receive support for their elementary education.

- ❖ Sponsor education - towards cost of supporting a child's education, studying in a school, till the age of economic independence identified by Relief Foundation, after a due diligence screening process. Rs 6000/- per year per child including educational resources, home library, home visits and counseling sessions for families for responsible living and linking them to various Government schemes where applicable.

- ❖ Sponsor an awareness program - towards creating awareness programs in our centres for the community, we require material as well as human resource support. To conduct the following programs in our centres, per session the costs including all the expenses to cover about 30 families would be Rs 20,000. Resource persons and materials, besides flyers would be used for these programs
 - Alcoholism
 - Importance of education
 - Girl child protection
 - Hygiene and healthcare
 - Healthy living medicine free
 - Self-employment
 - Career options for youth

Note: All donations made to Relief Foundation are exempted under Sec. 80G of the Income Tax Act of India

Contact us

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