

BALA LAKSHYA JYOTHI

(Lighting up Children's future)

Issue: Thirteen

Quarterly Newsletter from RELIEF FOUNDATION

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A Message from the Chairperson

Dear champion friends of Relief Foundation,

We are happy to share the updates of the last quarter. The New year brings us fresh hopes of renewal of association, new ideas and new plans. We have had fruitful discussions with our team on setting up ambitious yet attainable goals for this year. Our work in villages is delivering its promise to families slowly and increasingly. We are building our team's capacities to offer more than just Early childhood education, the Montessori way to children. Geography education is something that Dr. Montessori gave immense importance to, and our rural team is now experiencing the joy of learning how Geography is central to all education. Translation work on Montessori parenting articles have given us a great advantage of speaking to Tamil rural communities and parents, with conviction and the right language.

We invite volunteers to work with us on specific tasks that would value add to our organisation, one of which is fund raising for one of our rural centres that is all set for expansion.

We are happy that all of you are with us in this journey. We hope this association continues and we are able to share our experiences with you as we progress.

Best wishes till we meet next!

Vidya Shankar,
Chairperson

RF News

Updates from *CASCADE* Montessori
Rural Resource Centres

Vallambedukuppam Centre

General

We are glad to share the events and the efforts which were taken in our Vallambedukuppam centre. As a community development centre, we are not only concentrating on Montessori education but also on other social issues like Alcohol addiction, Environmental hazards and suicides etc. It is important to involve the local community in every initiative. As a first step, we are planning to train and involve nearby school students in all the awareness programs as much possible. As members of the community, they have every right to raise and question issues that are facing them every day in their locality. We are also taking efforts to reach out to school students to inculcate geography knowledge or rather making geographical connections in their lives. Please read further to know more about the work we do in this centre.

Toddler Children

2nd quarter saw an increase of children. 5 new admissions have happened taking the total number of children supported in the centre to 17. Our consistent efforts to urge parents to avail the services of our centre have always worked. The new children have slowly settled in the environment. The beauty of a Montessori environment is its accommodative nature to invite children any time of the year. The mixed age group gives the comfort wherein older children (4-5 years old) receive the young ones with unconditional love. This helps new children to settle much faster than any other schools. We are on the look out to move our existing centre to a new place, as the existing place is unable to take the developmental needs of children. We will soon keep you all posted in this column of the newsletter about the progress.

Parents' conference

Unlike parents meetings in other schools, a parent conference in a Montessori environment happens

twice or thrice a year. The purpose of this meeting is not to complain about children to parents. It is more to share the progress of a child looking at every aspect of development. A Montessori trained adult will look at a parent as a partner in the wellbeing of children. The meeting is used to strike a healthy relationship with parents of children who study in our centre.

A detailed report is prepared by the adult before the conference is fixed. The report is prepared based on observations done in the classroom and NOT through any kind of assessments. This is one of the key aspects of a Montessori environment. After the report is prepared, a meeting date and time is fixed based on mutual convenience. Both the parents are called to attend this meeting with centre's adult.

Once such meeting was held in January wherein all the parents were met and shared the progress of their children individually. This was completely new for parents who were not used to such meetings before. Also, most of the schools don't share detailed report of children focusing

on lots of positives of the children and areas of development. They sincerely appreciated the time taken by the adult to prepare such a report and also cherished the content in it. Such meetings help the adult in establishing good rapport with parents. On the whole, the centre strives towards creating a congenial environment for a child not only within the centre but also at home.

Meetings

Parents' meeting

A parents' meeting was held on 5th December 2017 at our Vallambudukuppam Montessori centre. A pamphlet with parenting content was designed to trigger the discussion among parents. Participants shared their views and opinions. It was coordinated by our staff member Prasanna bharathi.



A meeting was organized on 28th December at our Vallambdukuppam centre to discuss about language development and evolution in children. Our program director Mr. Murali Krishnan facilitated this meeting by employing special materials and quotes from Dr. Maria Montessori's books. A translated article of Ms. Maren Schmidt on child care was taken for discussion as well. On the whole, 15 parents participated in it.



A meeting was arranged for parents on 31st January at our centre. In this meeting, there was a discussion on child's development, what it meant as true education, children's activities, ill effects of rewards for

accomplishments and punishments, value of childhood, how to deal with learning challenges etc. Parents expressed their views interestingly. Our staff member Prasanna Bharathi facilitated this meeting.

Community Outreach

In Vallambdukuppam village, garbage is a major issue. There are lots of plastic covers, papers, food waste etc. thrown on the streets, because of which flies and mosquitoes have doubled. This poses real danger and harms not only the environment but also pollutes the ground water and the nearby soil in cultivable land. It also poses a serious health risk to adults and children who live there.

A constructive approach is being considered to involve the local panchayat and also the village people to initiate source segregation at home. In that, we are planning to distribute 3 bins to each household to separate wastes. An awareness programme has also been planned. In the long run, the project will be handed over to a Self Help Group (SHG). Initially, we are planning to clean the environment first and do the awareness programme in parallel.

We are also planning to involve local school students in this initiative. Anybody who is interested to financially support this initiative could write to us @ relieffoundationindia@gmail.com. If you like to volunteer and drive this initiative in the village, please do write to us too.

Geography Sessions in Tamil

Most of the children know only maps about Geography. This wonderful discipline is introduced as a subject in social studies in schools. Unless the teacher takes special interest to trigger the interests of children, most of them know geography only as a subject talking about physical places like land, water, etc. apart from maps.

In order to show the wider connections that Geography as a discipline has with other areas, in partnership with The Institute of Geographical Studies - Bangalore (TIGS) a regular training programme has been initiated for our staff members, particularly who work with children directly. And since our centres are in villages, these sessions are conducted in Tamil to lay strong foundation on the subject. Dr.

Chandra Shekhar, Founder and Director of TIGS is running these training sessions. Relief Foundation has been running Geo-Vidyaa Geography Centre (GVGC) in partnership with TIGS for the past 3 years in Chennai. One of the initiatives of GVGC Chennai is the Developing the Geographer's Eye in Tamil.



Agriculture Update

We have taken 40 cents on lease in Narasingapuram, a nearby village to Vallambudukuppam. During the last agriculture season we had sown

greens. Though rain damaged some part of the crop, we managed to harvest it well. This time, we have cultivated Groundnut and Tapioca. In the first week or second week of the March, the ground nut will be harvested. We need to wait for some more months to harvest Tapioca. Our staff member Paranthaman is taking care of this agricultural process. We will keep you posted more about this in this section of the newsletter.



Jamunamarathur Centre

Children @Casa/Toddler:

The strength of Casa rose to 15 over the period from November to

January. The children also moved from strength to strength with some of the elder children progressing further along the Culture aspects of the Montessori Curriculum.

The three little ones who were sticking around more with the Toddler room have completely transitioned to the Casa. The newbies also slowly settled in during the months of December and January.

The children continued to surprise the adults with their explorations notably - the combination of Graded figures with pieces of Decanomial, the words like 'Decanomial', 'pentagon' that children wanted to write using the Movable Alphabet, Frisbees used as make-belief selling baskets - to name a few.



The effect of elder children as role-models was more visibly pronounced during this period as the next rung of children progressed ahead at a much higher pace. The three year olds took to the Sand paper letters like a moth to fire and were most willing to

sustain the interest. While the younger ones looked up for inspiration, it was heartening to see the elder ones become more aware of the younger ones and start helping them whenever needed.

The children contributing to the maintenance of the environment is also a very important aspect. The manner in which a three year old returned the smallest piece of the pink tower (with humour - indicating that a crow in his name took it away) is a classic example. Apart from this the elder ones always took the opportunity to help the adults with the dusting work and beginning of day and end of day routines.



The children's half-yearly reports were also made and through individual parent conferences discussed with the parents. The conferences generally take thirty to forty-five minutes of time. It was most heartwarming to witness the parents of all the older children (three in number) asking if there was a

possibility of having an Elementary Montessori environment here itself. The reports were made for all the children who were with us for a minimum of three months until December 2017 and in all, 12 reports were made.

The children celebrated Republic day with a short flag hoisting ceremony. They listened to the 'Kodi paatu' in Tamil as Mr. Murali Krishnan, who was visiting during the time, hoisted the flag. After the flag salute, they sang the National anthem with gusto. Later sweets, in the form of jaggery-based peanut balls, were given out keeping in mind the ill-effects of sugar-based toffees on the young children.

Outreach Sessions:

The outreach to the Elementary school in Jamunamarathur continued in the months of November and January with a brief hiatus in December. In total, five sessions were conducted during this time. Apart from singing few songs, the storytelling generally served as a source for children to be made aware of the sounds and letters used for those individual sounds.

A Whatsapp group was started by one of the parents of our Centre. The group consists of lots of parents who

are living in and around Jamunamarathur. Updates about the Centre and meetings held at the Centre are passed on to the group so that they may attend.

Materials and Training:

The Bead Cabinet was a significant addition during this period that has really intrigued the children. Apart from this, Painting as an activity in the environment was added. It was so eagerly awaited that for the first few days, the papers in the supply would all be done and used up within the first couple of hours of the day. The children were already introduced to the idea in the summer when only the elder ones had come. Now they have it in the environment anytime at their disposal.



The two visits and the observations made by Mr. Murali Krishnan has been a wonderful learning experience for the adults. The second visit in January was a week long and it helped to see the environment and its functioning in a new perspective. Several changes have also been implemented to good effect within the classroom.

Agricultural Update:

A total of about 100 saplings were procured from Pochampalli and the saplings were quickly planted by the first week of November. The saplings consisted of a majority of Mango plants, few each of lemon, jackfruit, coconut, Sapodilla. Already 9 saplings of Pomegranate were planted and the entire land was tilled nicely before the final plantation. The pits were dug by employing an earth mover. The manure procured was added to the soil by the gardener over the next couple of weeks. The irrigation setup in the form of connected hosepipes worked out really well to reach all the plants.

Meanwhile the hotel waste and kitchen waste continue to come in for the compost pit behind the building. The bee boxes readied by the month of September soon were filled with occupants. Two Queen Bees were

procured and the setup was arranged in the far corner of the land under the Yellow trumpet tree and the Gulmohur tree. Both families have settled down nicely and the honey collection has started in earnestly.



Parent Sessions:

There were five parent circle sessions held during the time. Two of them were conducted by Mr. Murali Krishnan during his visits. One was conducted by our local adult Mr. Mani and two more were conducted by Mr. Hari.

They covered the following topics:

- Rewards and Punishments
- Importance of Self-Correction.
- Importance of the three hour work cycle.
- Social Development

The sessions were mostly in discussion form. Some sessions, like the ones

conducted by Mr. Murali, had role-plays to highlight how simple words used repeatedly can actually affect the children's development.



Case Study:

L. Lakshmi (name changed)
4 years 2 months
Female, Jamunamaruthur

Lakshmi enrolled at our Centre way back in April- May 2016. She lives right across our building. For the first six months of her time at the centre, she always insisted on the presence of her grandmother with her. She would in fact put her mat and work very close to her 'ava' and barely kept her out of sight. From there, she has come a really long way in coming to school along with the adults/parents when they walk by and always insisting on walking back home all alone.

During the last three months, her progress has been amazing across several areas. She is pretty comfortable with working on the Movable Alphabet in English and loves

to think of words and phrases to write on her own. Her progress on the Math area has been super-fast as her recognition of numbers and confidence on counting has grown leaps and bounds. The girl loves to create Land and water forms in the outdoor area most of the time and loves working with Puzzle maps as well. She enjoys keeping in touch with the basic Practical Life and Sensorial activities. With growing numbers she is a potential role model in the classroom who can help the younger ones lovingly and with care. Socially as well, she is never shy to talk to anyone.

Voice of the Parent:

Mr. And Mrs. Ramesh (name changed),
Jamunamarathur
Parents

"I feel that daughter who is with CASCADE has had faster development than my son who is now studying 4th at a Government school. She is able to grasp things much faster and is quick to respond to any questions.

I find her to be very active and seems to have the knowledge that my son had only by 2nd standard."

The parent was also one of the three who inquired if we would be starting

an Elementary environment in the near future.

Challenges Faced:

An unfortunate injury to one of the adults meant the outreach program to the Middle school was cancelled for close to 6 weeks. The other adult, Mr. Mani, was able to manage the class during the entire month of December while Mr. Hari underwent treatment in Chennai. The awareness programs also could not proceed along expected lines. They resumed after he joined back in January 2018.

The children coming in at different times was observed to be very distracting and hence the Centre's gate was locked from the month of December sharp at 9:30 am. With this significant change, the children's work cycles were visible with longer work being openly embraced. This has been a really big learning for the adults as well.



Other initiatives

GVGC Chennai - Course on Geography

GVGC (Geo Vidyaa Geography Centre) is an initiative by [TIGS](#) - [Relief Foundation](#). Through this we organize programmes for children, parents and teachers as well. One of the goals of GVGC is to take Geography education to rural and urban children. And for that to happen, teachers are the best candidates, because they regularly interact with children.

Dr. Montessori had extensively talked and included Geography in the curriculum. In fact the first story that a new elementary child receives in a Montessori classroom is about creation. So, it was easy for us to design a course for Montessorrians. A course called Developing the Geographer's Eye was conceived for Montessori teachers, parents of Montessori children and adolescent children above 15 years old. It was launched in January 2018. We had

about 22 people signed up for the introduction. The course has been conceived with one session per month for about 10 months. Dr. Chandrashekhar, founder and director of TIGS, facilitates the session. We have 12 people signed up for the full course. The whole idea is to help the adults see Geography connections. In a traditional setup Geography is more emphasized on maps. But real geography is there everywhere and all around us. It requires an eye to see that and that's the goal of this course called "Developing the Geographer's eye.". A new batch is expected from August 2018. Please write to mjkrishnan76@gmail.com to know more about this.



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. We can receive **foreign currency** through our partnership with **Rotary Club of Madras East Trust**. Those who wish to donate, please write to us.

Contact us

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