

Manigal Project, Kottur site visit, 31 October 2019 By Shereen Broido

I have been volunteering with the Project Manigal once a week this year, with timings of late morning to the end of the school day. About 15-18 children between 5 and 10 years old are typically present. When I arrive the upper-level and intermediate-level students will be grouped with Sri Durga and Jayalakshmi, and the beginners will be sitting independently with drill-work (alphabets / numbers) or word-picture puzzles. I will sit with these children until lunch time.

During the 12:00 O'clock lunch period the children eat lunch outside of the classroom, but several come back in as soon as they have finished eating to look at picture books or do puzzles.

After lunch the children work independently on assigned tasks while the teachers (who must mind the classroom during the lunch period) quickly eat their own lunches. During this time I am able to work with individual children or small groups.

After 45 minutes to 1 hour, I go next door to the mainstream 2nd standard class for an English activity. When I come back I work with students who need specific kinds of help or make time for a large-group English activity.

At the end of the day, the classroom will be cleaned up and then the children will come together for a meditation/mindfulness period. They sit in the yoga posture and close their eyes. After some silent time, there will be time for reflection – Sri Durga will remind them to change out of their uniforms when they get home, etc. Then more silent time, and finally, all line up as instructed and file down the stairs to the school ground.

This pattern held when I visited today.

In the morning I worked with the 1st standard children. There are two who come regularly to school, Janani and Vai Dehi. They have both learned their alphabets and numbers and are starting to learn to write words. So we did word-work, 'apple', 'ant', 'cat' and 'cup' (drawing on the ChuChu TV video 'Phonics Song With Two Word', which they had seen last week). They were mixing up the words initially but after some practice and help they kept the words separate and wrote each one clearly and correctly and identified them when pointed to.

In the afternoon, I went to the mainstream 2nd standard class for an English activity. The Manigal project I am told is also aiming to share learning processes and materials with other children of the school besides focussing on the gypsy children. The weekly 2nd standard English activities serve this purpose.

Generally when I arrive the students have finished their lunch and are doing drill-work, while the teacher (who has no lunch break) finishes her own lunch.

Last week, the teacher had asked for activities closer to the curriculum than I had been doing. So today we started a vocabulary project that will take us to the end of Term 2 and that covers about 50 words from the 2nd standard Term 2 textbooks. This project is based on the ChuChu TV video, 'Phonics song with 2 words'. It teaches the 52 words from the song in 26 sentences that describe the imagery in the video, using a total of about 100 words (the extra words are from earlier terms).

The children have workbooks in which they revise known words, practice new words, and make new sentences, some of which are presented on the board and read aloud by the whole class. For

each sentence there is also a phonics practice section in the workbook and there are flash cards for sentence-assembly.

Today, as it was the first day of the project, the children also coloured-in the cover image of ChuChu on their workbooks.

The class teacher grouped the children in mixed-ability groups, and the advanced students guided the weaker ones. Both of us circulated among the groups to make sure everyone understood what to do. The class teacher is flexible and allowed the time needed for everyone to finish (about 1 1/2 hours). The class is well-organized. Today, those who finished early were set to tasks (collecting workbooks, crayons, erasing the board). By the time I had fully shifted back to Manigal project class, 2nd standard was ready for their next lesson.

Back in Manigal class, the students were again grouped by subject and ability level and were in the midst of lessons. Today Mrs. Usha Bhaskar had come for a visit to the school and she was interacting with a few children. I worked with 3 of the older students for a reading project.

This reading project uses picture books of 5-9 pages with short lines of repetitive text on each page. Each student has a reader-response workbook with a page for each book.

The books are useful for ESL students because of the explanatory pictures, which help the children pick up written vocabulary words, and the repetitive text, which helps them to pick up English sentence patterns and grammar words.

However, for the Gypsy children even these simple books are challenging. English is their 3rd language, and they have only in-school exposure. Even though Sri Durga and Jayalakshmi speak slowly and clearly, and the children understand them, and even though the children's oral vocabulary has grown rapidly during the time I have known them, they will not speak in English. So simply reading the books aloud gives a kind of training in correct English speech.

Today, one student, Ramya, sat by herself and read some of the books, leaving the workbook aside.

Karthik first read through a book that he had previously read. He did this voluntarily, I think in order to savour the sensation of successful deciphering of a challenging code. Then we took up a new book. Karthik resisted until he saw that the book was within his 'independent level' and he finished the book and the corresponding workbook page. This did require constant pressure from me, I think because it was near the end of the day and he was tired.

Another student, Siva Sakthi, had missed an earlier session and had not received his workbook. When he got it he insisted on colouring the cover image

The class has a heterogeneous group of students. Some children seem to be restless and don't feel settled in the classroom and getting them to pay attention can be a daunting task for any teacher.

A lot of current research in education focusses on the role of 'executive function' in learning. 'Executive function' is the capacity to control your mental focus and to quiet down your physical and emotional activity to help you focus your mind.

After visiting Sri Durga's class during the past year, I would say that (in my opinion), her great achievement has been to strengthen the children's 'executive function'. She does this by bringing the whole class to attention several times during the day, for this or that overt purpose, and by devoting the final 10 minutes of every day to a combination of meditation and contemplation.

The children sit in the meditation pose, eyes closed, legs crossed, hands turned up on knees, thumbs and forefingers touching. There will be intervals of silence and intervals of exhortations about hygiene, safety, etc. One can see their breath slowing and steadying.

Today Mrs.Usha Bhaskar gave out snacks to the children after the meditation.

The day ended calmly yet with a cheerful feeling.

On my way out I saw Mrs. Geetha working with the middle school children (whose school day is longer than the primary). These children are an early generation of the project, a transitional generation whose parents felt free to pull them out of school for travel and for attendance at festivals. So their skill levels are comparatively lower. Today, Mrs. Geetha and I agreed that the reading project in use in the primary class would also benefit her students, so those materials will be made ready for her by next week.

One 7th standard boy joined us and read one of the books in the reading-project collection, 'A Kitten is a Baby Cat' (Scholastic). He needed help with 'see' (first response = 'is', a common 'early alphabetic phase' error). As this word appears on all 7 pages of the book, by the end, he had overcome the incorrect impulse. Clearly, with an appropriate remedial curriculum, even a low-attendance child like this one would have been able to catch up to his peers. But the Project teachers in middle school have to spend most of their time with the textbooks.

This was a good lesson for me to absorb on leaving today.









