My parents and I spent a day at Deenabandhu, visiting the children’s home, Deenabandhu School, the Science park and the newly constructed Science gallery. We started our day with discussions with Prajna, Rohan and Prof Jayadev over how things were going, particularly given the Covid learning gap.

I particularly like how Deenabandhu School is handling the Covid learning gap. They follow a straightforward approach.

**Attendance**
Deenabandhu School, like many Asha project schools, has built a deep relationship of trust with the community, and they make the school a place that children enjoy, with a nurturing atmosphere where children can grow and flourish. When Deenabandhu School reopened, parents were keen to send their children back to school, however strong the attraction of the additional income some of the older children were bringing in. Parents trusted Deenabandhu and knew the value of the school for their children. So in two weeks attendance was back at close to 100%.

**Behavioral Issues**
An unexpected challenge was the behavioral issues of children who had to re-learn sitting in a classroom and paying attention to the teacher. Some of these children were irregular in attending classes. Teachers had to be patient, strict, and persuasive. It took a couple of months for children to get back into the routine of being in a classroom and interacting with a teacher.

**The Learning Gap**
Deenabandhu School conducted assessments for every child to know what level they were at. They identified classes that had the most challenges, and these were classes IV and X (these students were in class II and class VIII before the pandemic). For children up to class VII they set aside the syllabus and focused on the basics – reading, writing, and arithmetic. The passionate teachers at the school had been well trained in focusing on understanding concepts, rather than “finishing the syllabus.”

Teacher Parvati explained how she works with children in class III (they were in class I before the pandemic). She categorizes them into three groups in the Kannada class, based on their ability to read letters, combine consonants and vowels, and combine consonants. Then in each class she works with all three groups. She first works individually with each group, assigning work to the other two groups, or asking some of the stronger students to help their peers. Then she does a series of blackboard exercises that the entire class participates in. “This is a lot of work,” I said. She smiled. “We have to help every child master basic reading and writing. Otherwise they can never catch up. That is our duty.” Deenabandhu teachers know what needs to be done, and they want to get that done. Kannada classes form the bulk of the school day for class III, much higher than the typical one hour per day before the pandemic. For some of the classes the school has added an extra hour before and after regular school hours.
In Arithmetic they found that students in class V had forgotten multiplication and division, but mostly remembered addition and subtraction. They focused on these basics, designing three special classes each week. The upper primary school (classes V to VII) headmaster noted that the children were very silent at first, but then began interacting with the teacher, a sign that they were learning.

Because of a focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic this school year there will be catching up to do next year, and perhaps the year after. The Deenabandhu School teachers know that, and are prepared.

Deenabandhu School has a heavy emphasis on experiential learning for Science and Maths. Children learn by doing. This had helped lay a strong foundation before the pandemic, and the good understanding of concepts (rather than rote memorization) was helpful now as the children in higher classes could quickly remember what they had learnt earlier. “A good foundation had been laid,” said the headmaster.

Deenabandhu School had also assiduously been in touch with all the children during the lockdown, and provided them with worksheets and other material that the parents would pick up weekly. That has helped to some extent. Thanks to the devotion to the cause of education for underprivileged children by the Deenabandhu School teachers, and the zeal of parents to ensure their children continued learning, worksheets were regularly provided by the teachers and worked on by the students.

The teachers say that students who were in classes VIII, IX and X before the pandemic have suffered the most. Students who were in class VIII are in now class X, and forced to take the exam after just a few months of school. These students don’t have the time to catch up. The teachers are tense about the SSLC exam, and expect only 70 to 80% of the students to pass (instead of the usual 100%). Students who were in class IX before the pandemic had an easy pass in class X, and are now in class XI (which is a higher secondary class), but Deenabandhu School ends at high school so the students move to other schools for classes XI and XII. They are out of Deenabandhu School, so the ability of the school to help is limited. Similarly students who were in class X had an easy pass but are now facing difficulties in class XII which are likely to continue through to college. Again, the teachers at Deenabandhu School have limited options to help.

Deenabandhu School acknowledges that there will be a lag for a while. Some aspects of the prescribed syllabus will be left out this year and perhaps the next. But as long as the children are well-grounded in the basics – the 3 Rs for younger classes, and basic concepts for higher classes – the children will be well-served and can catch up.

**Working with Local Government Schools**

Deenabandhu has taken the same approach to a government school in a nearby village. One of the Deenabandhu School teachers focuses on Kannada and Arithmetic at that upper primary school (classes I to VII). Like many other government schools, this school also saw a jump in enrollment – parents did not want to pay private school fees when schools were locked down and had moved their children to local government schools. Enrollment at this government school had increased by 40%, and with the teaching style made possible with Deenabandhu’s help these children continue to stay in that school, helping parents save their meager resources. Because of the poor quality of government schools, parents had been steadily moving their children to private schools, spending their meager resources. Those left behind in government schools were often girls and the poorest of the poor. Now with some
children coming back and staying on in this government school we hope this will be yet another example of how government schools can work well.

**Summary**
Well-trained teachers who create a nurturing atmosphere at school, a culture of ensuring every child learns, one-on-one interactions wherever necessary, deep trust in the community resulting in their active involvement in the school, and lots of love and patience – with this we can overcome the Covid learning gap.

**Science Gallery**
Oracle helped support the creation of a Science Museum in 2020/2021. The museum is adjacent to the Science park, and is a state-of-the-art Science museum mostly hand crafted by the staff at Deenabandhu with the help of local workers. It is a valuable resource for local schools and children who now have access to a museum right in Chamarajanagara, and do not need to travel to Bangalore or some other major city to visit a Science museum.

Pictures of the Science museum, and other parts of the visit, are [here](#).