INTRODUCTION

For us, 2010-2011 has been a year of re-identifying our objectives and re-thinking our role in education. In the last four years, about 50-60 children have graduated from our school and 95% of them have fared quite well in the mainstream schools.

Yet we wondered about the impact of such an initiative. **How could we address the larger concern of inclusion of alternative thought in education?** When Ramchandar Krishnamurty was here, we believed that we could create a teacher training institute, where the alternate methods, thoughts and directions in education can be shared with interested people and a degree in education can be granted. This would be a way of increasing Puvidham’s impact on the field of education.

In order to fulfill this vision, **we need to have a school which is not so small.** We need to have class sizes that are recommended by the Right to Education Act and methods that will still continue to be as individual-oriented as they are now.

CHANGES

**Another issue that kept coming up was the issue of what we would think appropriate to teach.** Considering our philosophy that life has to be connected with the earth, **learning has to be connected to life.** This led to the development of our new curriculum. In our curriculum we have tried to integrate learning needs with life experiences. This is done through the medium of stories and songs. Children love listening to stories, singing and dancing, and working with their hands. These are used as the medium to introduce science concepts, social science concepts and linked with activities that include the mathematics, geometry and arts like painting, clay work and origami.

FOCUS ON LIFE SKILLS

The following sections on Life Skills and the New Curriculum are excerpts of an article written by Meenakshi for the March 2011 issue of LEISA. It details the new curriculum’s emphasis on life skills, specifically as they pertain to organic agriculture, Puvidham’s main focus.

**Organic agriculture or farming was the basis of all great civilizations.** It was the first art, craft, science and economics that man learnt. Farming was the foundation of the evolution of all the other specializations of work and study. **Yet organic farming is now forgotten and**
lost in machines and spacecrafts that can do no good to anyone without the basis of farming. Farming is the most important occupation on earth for nothing can survive without food. While this simple fact has not changed, the attitudes of society have shifted drastically. Farming is now left to the people who are considered incapable of doing anything else. Farming is not considered a worthy occupation. It is felt to be the lowest of jobs. Anybody who can, gets a job and leaves the village as quick as he/she can. This sad state of affairs is perhaps true for the whole of India.

There is, therefore, a need for farming to receive greater attention in India’s education system. In our school we treat farming as a very important activity and its importance in the overall picture of life is emphasized. Amongst career options like doctor, engineer, teacher etc, ‘farmer’ is included with pride.

To inspire children to do something it is important to validate the activity through continuous indulgence in the same.

THE NEW CURRICULUM

Keeping all these requirements in mind, we decided to classify our learning into five basic modules centered on the five elements: Sun, Earth, Water, Air and Space.

The five elements are essential for survival. The children learn the physical properties and experience these elements through their five senses. We call this type of learning Experiential learning.

Learning is much more accessible for practical use if it is experiential or has been acquired by doing. The basic essential concepts deemed necessary by the educational boards and institutions are incorporated in stories and songs and repeated and recited in class.

The children make concept drawings to express what they have understood from the stories and songs. Mathematical activities like counting, sorting, classifying, measuring, measured drawings, scaled drawings and geometrical drawings like the traditional Rangolies are included in mathematics in the class.

Discussions, walks, observations and questions are a part of everyday classes. Children are guided to speak about what it is they know about the element or the concept and then the teacher helps them to build on their existing knowledge of the same.

From class one, we incorporate the hypothesis and experimentation for checking hypothesis into the class room.
The older children are divided into groups. On an empty plot of land they decide and mark the part they want to grow plants in. They measure the plot and draw it to scale. They design the rows and decide what they want to plant. They calculate the quantity of seed they will need. They mulch, water and watch their plants grow. They measure the rate of growth, count the number of flowers and compare with the number of fruits.

They observe and sketch the plant parts and the insects and birds that visit. Finally they compute the time they spent gardening and the quantity of vegetables they could harvest and make a cost analysis of their activity. They also learn to make natural pest control extracts and vermi composting (using earthworms for composting.)

This type of knowledge synthesizing process we believe will empower the children and make them feel that their methods of learning are valid.

By celebrating and using the knowledge that children have about the environment, and by presenting farming as a positive choice socially, the children from our school will have a more balanced perspective.

We also hope that the fact that they have had so much time to dwell on it will help them resist the parental and peer pressure to make money the sole object of their work.

ACADEMIC YEAR 2010-2011

Though the curriculum has not been fully developed we have been trying it out in the classrooms. We have combined classes LKG and UKG taken by Pacchiammal, 1st and 2nd taken by Rameshwari, 3rd and 4th taken by Senbagam and 5th and 6th taken by Meenakshi. For the 7th and 8th, we continued to use the state government text books and the classes were taken by Kuppusamy. We have prepared the stories based on the concepts which it is deemed necessary to learn at the particular levels. The material is now being revised and some has to be written as yet. But we do feel confident that we can implement it in all the classes up to the 6th the coming year.

One of the best outcomes of the new curriculum was that all the teachers have made efforts to write their own stories and songs. They are very happy with the new way of leading the classroom. Though they are constantly redefining their roles as teachers due to the new curriculum they have taken very amicably to learning what the children know, want to know and desire and feel. This way of guiding the children is more difficult than teaching them a few skills but the interpersonal relationships between children and between the children and the teacher undergo a major change and there is more trust and partnership involved.
These methods have the potential to enhance the observation skills, analytical skills and independent thought and discovery of the children.

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Because of the major child trafficking incidents in the last few years, all children’s homes now have to be registered and the registration renewed every three years. So we have had to redo the hostel dining room roof which was a thatch roof in a rush to be able to apply for registration before the last date. We also had a number of other labour-intensive administrative tasks to perform this year:

1. The district social welfare department head came and visited the hostel and we hope they will grant us registration soon.
2. Our 80G is now to be permanent till further order relieving us of the task of renewing it every three years.
3. The Puvidham Nursery and Primary school approval has been renewed and our registration extended for another three years.

In all the government approvals, we have kept our hands clean and not indulged in paying bribes to any official. So there are delays and we often have to send petitions to the collector but finally we get the certificates without any payment for which we do not have a receipt.

This is a major source of pride for us because we want our children to understand that there are ways and means of working with the system even if it is so corrupt. All the administrative work and accounting work is done with Mr. Madhavraj’s guidance and support.

We are also happy to share that two of our first batch of students, Murugan and Sabarimani are now helping with the farm and the school activities and funding their own education. They are now staying in the hostel as hostel wardens and looking after the farming and hostel maintenance. The trust pays them and they are able to continue their education without any financial help from their families. This is an important issue because many of the children that have discontinued their education have done so due to financial constraints.

Trainings and exposure for teachers

1. Mr. Devarajan from Dharmapuri took time especially for our teachers and took Yoga class for 15 days teaching us Pranayama and self healing techniques in April.
2. Two teachers, Samanthi and Rameshwari, went for a storytelling workshop held by Kathalaya in May.
3. Some older students involved in the farming extension work and some of the teachers went to the “millet mela” organized at Bangalore in December. Dinesh and
Kalyani, who have started a millet processing unit at KADIR in Andhra Pradesh met us there and showed us the diversity of millets. Dinesh has been since then sending us millets for the hostel students and the children have really been blessed to have such healthy grains.

4. Rameshwari, Senbagam, Adam, Meenakshi and Madhavaraj visited **Poorna School** in order to observe of their teaching methods in the end of Jan 2011. We all found it a very enriching experience. The school premises and the atmosphere there is very like Puvidham and we all felt very comfortable. We also attended the function where Shabnam Virmani sang lovely songs of the poet Kabir.

**Extension work.**

1. The organization called **Operation 5th Pillar** has a lot of experience in filing Right To Information petitions and fighting corruption. We had an awareness camp with their help in early September.

2. The **local farmers group** is completing its first year. The rains have been good and two farmers have converted to fully non-chemical farming. We have been trying to convince the farmers to grow local food crops and millets. Sabarimani goes to the farms to see what is grown on the farm and help with accounts of the farming group. We planted 150 trees on our hostel land including pongam and neem. The farmers group has finally taken off and the organic farming farmers group now has meetings every month and saves small cash for emergencies. We also helped two farmers to plant trees in their fallow land.

**Visitors.**

1. A group of teachers from **J.B.R Vidyalaya**, West Godavari District A.P, run by Sandhya from Chennai, came for a four day work shop and teacher training program. Both Samanthi and Rameshwari shared what they had learnt. It was a very useful session for those teachers and for Samanthi and Rameshwari.

2. **Aishwarya Narayan**, a 15 year old student from the US came with her family and spent about a week teaching songs to the children. Mr and Mrs Narayan and their relatives also made a generous donation to the corpus funds of the trust.

3. Four teachers from **Aksharnandan Pune** spent three days in July observing our classroom practices and gave a lot of positive feed back.

4. **Adam Dickinson**, a student in the University of Toronto is here for his internship since September 2010. His contribution to the development of the curriculum has been invaluable.

5. In November we had a student from TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences ) Bombay, called **Prathima**. She spent four days observing the classes. She was also interested in a detailed study of our methodology.
6. Lots of **local visitors** and supporters including doctors, engineers and other friends from ‘Udavum Ullangal’ a local support organization keep coming and enriching us with their experiences and feed back.

**Children’s Network**

1. Our friends from **Nataraj Gurukul** in **Darjeeling** came down in mid July and we all had special integrated class for one month.

2. At the end of the month we took them and our children from 5th to 8th on a tour to Madurai, Kanyakumari, Mundandhurai sanctuary and Karayar Dam and the Kuttralam Falls. It was a three day tour and all of us had a great experience. They were seeing the ocean for the first time and were thrilled to see the sunrise in Kanyakum.

3. In March, 8 of our children with Kuppusamy and Adam went to **Darjeeling** and had a memorable time. The Puvidam students studied in the same classes as the Gurukul students for one month. They had the opportunity to take in the natural beauty of the Himalayas through hikes to the nearby river, and Tiger Hill, near Darjeeling. They saw many of the villages surrounding **Nataraj Gurukul** and were shown exceptional hospitality by all the people of Gurukul.

4. Children from **La Parle School** in **Edmonton, Canada** have started a friendship with our schoolchildren. Children from our school made cards and sent them to the children there and the children there responded with cards and sent lots of small children’s things to our school. Now our children are busy making friends bands, knitted ribbons, and hair bands and cards to send to them. Their enthusiasm is infectious.

**More news.**

1. Meenakshi was invited to share her experience and give her suggestions for change in the **Right to Education act** in a workshop conducted through UNICEF. She made a presentation and suggested that the curriculum development should be a right of every school that wants to take it up.

2. An article ‘**Farming as a positive choice**’ written by Meenakshi was published in the **LEISA INDIA** magazine in the March 2011 issue and can be accessed at [www.leisaindia.org](http://www.leisaindia.org).

3. Meenakshi and Adam wrote an article on the use of stories and storytelling in the new curriculum. It is due to appear in the June issue of the British storytelling journal **Storylines**.

**Our future plans**

- In the immediate future, we are planning to **extend our strength up to 120 students** in the primary section. We have decided to increase the strength in the school and charge a higher fee for those who can pay so that in time the school can take care of its running expenses and is not dependent on external funds as it is now.
• To make this more feasible we have decided to provide transport facilities to children so that they can attend school without having to be in the hostel.
• We are planning to apply for registration and approval up to the 8th grade so that our students can spend more time with us, and we are able to help them mould themselves into caring, sensitive and assertive individuals who care for the earth. By now we have a good reputation as a school whose students do well in other schools after they pass out. The parents are also happy that the education is bilingual and children are fairly fluent in English by the time they are in the 5th grade.

Immediate needs

 o As the school grows, it will become imperative for us to construct a new school building. At present, the existing structures will not be sufficient for an increased number of students. Therefore, we urgently need funds to begin construction of a new school building in the next year.
 o As the school grows, we will seek to increase not only the number of students, but the number of villages that we can accept students from. In the coming years, we will need a proper school bus to be able to bring the children to school from far off villages. At present, the Tata magic is being used for this purpose. However, is not a school vehicle but a trust vehicle. We can use it as long as the number of students is low, but in the long run it is advisable to bring the children to school only in yellow painted vans.

Since we charge very low school fees, Puvidham relies heavily on donations, especially for capital projects such as the two listed above. We have been very fortunate indeed to enjoy financial support from various chapters of ASHA for Education, as well as smaller contributions from dozens of generous individuals both in India and abroad.

Puvidham is a registered trust and can accept donations from India and abroad, and issue a tax receipt accordingly. For enquiries regarding donations, please e-mail puvidham@gmail.com or call 09600491176. Thank you for your support.

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Postal address: Puvidham, Nagarkoodal village and post ( via) Indur, Dharmapuri ,Pin no: 636803, Tamilnadu, India.