



The Life Skill Education program

April | May 2007

Balavihar | Thiruvananthapuram | Kerala | India

Prepared by Anitha. S | E :: anithasharma2007@gmail.com



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Thiruvananthapuram,
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The Life Skill Education program of Balavihar in 2007 was conducted with support from ASHA-St.Louisiana Chapter as an extension here the centre is based. The program was organized with active support from Action Council-Vellarada. Due to a variety of reasons like unrest due to illicit liquor brewing in the tribal area (Eyakode in Trivandrum district) and personal constraints of the contact person, there was slight changes in the venue of the program .But the new areas were similar to the original ones in the social, economic and cultural milieu for which they were chosen.

All the camps followed a general pattern in time schedule, the resource persons and topics. Stress was given to have less of lectures and more of activities that will bring out the full potential of the participants. The participants in the program included both girls and boys of age group 10-15. The programs were arranged and organized with the active help of local Self Help Groups (SHG), local self government representatives (LSG), non governmental organizations(NGO) and socially active individuals. The participants were also chosen with the help of these groups.

Why Such A Life Skill Education Camp?

The Life Skill Education camps were conceived in this manner after the experience of a similar program that was conducted in Balavihar in the summer of 2006. This addressed children from the urban milieu who already have a host of exposure and experiences. A comment made a parent of a participant who alone was from the working class made me think of the need for a extension activity away from the city. He said “Why do you do this program here in the middle of the city? If you move little way there are so many children dying to be part of some creative interaction-next year move away from here

and have it in 3-4 areas”. This made me put the proposal before the Balavihar committee and also apply to ASHA.

The Life Skill Education program has a multi-pronged approach. At one level it seeks to bring out the creative potential of the participants through a series of interactive sessions in the inside space. At another level it attempts to expose the child to a series of skills that will be identified as the best suited by the child herself. The program also tries to create a space where the child feels confident and not under undue pressure to perform and prove oneself. In that sense it questions and subtly diverts away from the highly competitive killer instincts that formal schools are nurturing in the growing child. The program also creates a dialogue with the younger generation about learning and education as also what their life and profession should be- a virtual hand-holding happens here. The program also emphasizes and focuses on relating all aspects and skills to oneself- hence the subtitles –ME AND MUSIC, ME AND HEALTH. This has been found to be highly significant that the child finds a space in relation to his/her capacity and need.

Where Were The Programs –Geographical Areas?

There was a slight change in the original locations of the programs due to a variety of a reasons. But the new areas were similar to the original ones in the geographical, cultural, economic and social reasons for which they were chosen.

The General Program Schedule:

The program was generally divided into 4 sessions-2 in the forenoon and two after lunch. This excluded the brief introductory and concluding sessions for each day. The first session was a general

introduction which included self-introduction through games or group activity. Though time-consuming this is found to be essential for the overall atmosphere of rapport that is essential. The rationale behind the program gets introduced through a question session in which the participants express their expectations from the camp.

The second session would introduce the concept of personality and also the need to grow into a full individual capable of free and independent thought. The children would unravel through a game how and what are the ingredients necessary for this. This session would gradually zoom into one's own physical, spatial and cultural identity. This is done with the help of stories and songs and in the end a brief questionnaire on WHY DO YOU LOVE WHERE YOU ARE BORN?.

After lunch, the group would be split into 4-5 depending on the number and group work given which has to conclude in a 5 minute oral presentation. The topics ranged from ME AND MY HOME, ME AND SCHOOL, ME AND NATURE or ME AND ART. The presentations could be skits, mime, sketches, poems, writings and posters. The materials and concepts would be provided. This group work will help to break the ice between the participants and also aid in pooling skills in a healthy way. The need to present will help the participants to identify potential leaders and coordinators for this short assignment. This will also create a conducive atmosphere for the entry of guest resource persons. The first day would end with a brief assignment about home and environs to be done overnight.

The second day is for the guest resource person who will occupy the whole forenoon with a topic that has been decided earlier. Apart from the style and modus operandi, the content will be decided after dialogue with the Balavihar team-this is to avoid conflict with the overall ideology of the program. There would be an introductory session in which the previous day's program would be evaluated and also the assignments collected.

The afternoon will be group work based on the morning's topics or an assignment that would aid in the overall output of the program. In the case of certain areas, outdoor activities, film screening and music session would be conducted.

The third day in some cases can accommodate a guest or else it would be an interactive session with the group including an intense evaluation program. The evaluation is at times done with the help of a questionnaire to save time, but most often it is impromptu.

The afternoon session is entirely devoted to the creative talent expression of the participants and stage shows. This is the most active period and the level of participation is high. The concluding session is sometimes formal, or else it happens casually over a cup of tea and snacks and of course lots of farewell handshakes and the occasional tears!!

The Program-What Happened, Where?

The first camp was held in VELLARADA, about 70 kms from Trivandrum city with the help of the ACTION COUNCIL VELLARADA. The camps were held from April 2nd-4th, 2007, in the office hall of the ACV. The camp was organized by Sri Resalayan and his team who have an active student interaction program in the area. There was an increase in number of participants from 60- 94 as the program proceeded from the first-third day. The program generally started by 9.30 am and continued till 4pm with lunch and tea breaks.

The Content:

The program in Vellarada was inaugurated by the Director of Library Council who introduced the concept of Reading and the role of books in shaping the personality.

The participants spoke of the books they have read. The ACV has a good and systematically maintained village library in which many of the children are members.

The first day's session followed the pattern mentioned above with ANITHA of Balavihar conducting the programs.

The afternoon session focused on ME AND LIFE STYLE. The groups analysed the following topics-Our clothes, the Water we use, Energy we consume and the Waste we produce. The first group made a presentation on the need to incorporate handlooms and the reasons for that. The second group performed a skit on Water conservation that was very effective. The third group made a poster on Energy wastage and the need to save energy. The fourth group went outside the campus and collected all the waste that was strewn around by the public and made an assessment about the magnitude of the issues. Each of this was accompanied by a discussion. The sessions were interspersed with a story and a song that the whole group sang together.

The second day was handled by Dr.S.Santhi, a noted environmentalist in Kerala with years of experience in environmental education and conducting nature camps. She spoke of the need to place one's identity in the context of one's own environment- ME AND ENVIRONMENT. The interactions were made alive with stories and songs all of which carried an environmental message. Santhi also went through all the assignments and commented on the detailing and space for improvement. The participants interacted actively in this program and asked many questions. The day ended with a song



on biodiversity.

The third day saw a lot of excitement. The Circle Inspector from the Police Department visited the camp and spoke to the participants about civic sense, the need to be responsible citizens. A man with impeccable service records and public relations, the participants were able to imbibe many values from his interaction. He was also able to break the conventional image of a violent and rough policeman by his talk and knowledge. This was followed by a special program on ME AND MAGIC by Shri.Kannan of Gems Foundation with special



emphasis on Environment called HARITHA JALAM. The program which lasted an hour took the children on a magical journey in which they too participated. The inclusion of a well- though out environmental message was appreciated by all. There was an evaluation of the program after that. The major suggestions that came up were:

The program should have been of longer duration
There should be space for frequent meetings in future, maybe once in 2 months.

The output of the camp could have been enhanced by more days, resource persons and activities.

How many participants?

The total number of participants was 95. The starting day had 65 which increased as the days progressed. The ACV could not curb the entry as most of the children were coming from the impoverished areas around Vellarada with which the organization is in close contact. The most important observation made during this camp is that though the age group of the participants ranged from 8-16, there was no communication gap nor was there a problem with the response. The group was very receptive, systematic and disciplined in a normal way.

The ACV is maintaining the contacts and also planning to have a program in December, 2007 with a smaller group. Some of the children have been writing and Balavihar has send some books to the library for children on wildlife.

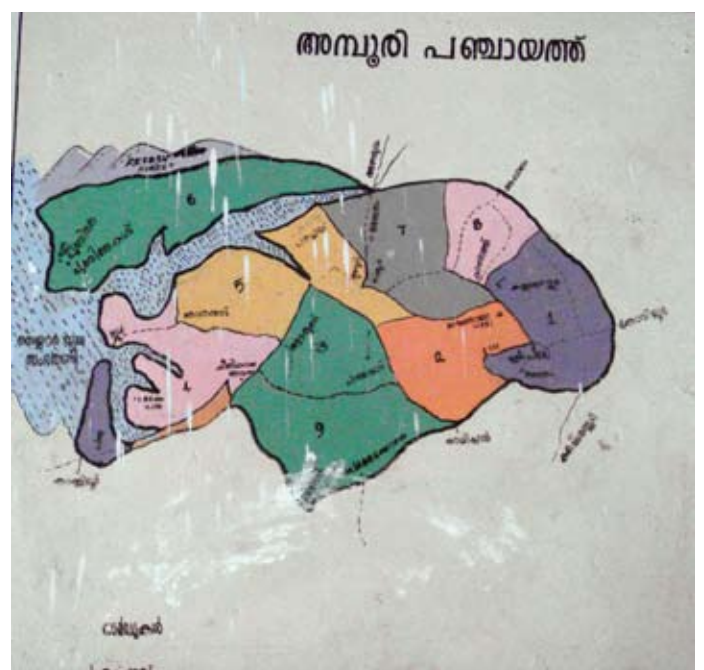
Puravimala-Kani Tribal Area:

This group was also organized by ACV as it is within their activity zone for the past few years. The Puravimala area is located in the middle of the reservoir created by the Neyyar dam. The area can be reached by boat. The children in the program have to cross a patch f forest to reach the venue. The program could be held only for one and a half days because of the rain and also the inability of children to camp there. There was less of formality in the air because the venue was on the edge of a forest which though degraded had the ambience of wilderness. There was an attempt to follow the general pattern as described in the outset, but it was not done to perfection.

The camp was visited by 3 resource persons. These were Dr.Santhi who elucidy brought out the significance of a tribal identity and the forest-based economy and life style of the Kani tribe to which the children belonged. Mr.Jean Nettare took the children out into the

field on a photo-shoot –this was received with much enthusiasm and the marvel of being able to convert images was expressed. The third person was the Tribal Welfare Officer of the region who came unexpectedly as he was passing through, but his presence made a marked change in the response of the parents who had accompanied the children. He spoke to them about the situation of tribals in other parts of the State like Wynad and Idukki which was an eye-opener for the participants. He also described what the rights of tribals are- the right to land, life style, ethnicity and resources. The participants did an exercise on mapping their own area-it was seen that the children have a strong sense of direction and placement. The camp had to be discontinued due to heavy rains and also the distance from the hamlets to the venue. The major highlights of this camp were:

The parents, especially the mothers of the children attended the



program throughout. Many a time the mothers were the real resource persons giving inputs on tribal food, rituals and original habitations. The children were extremely responsive. I would like to particularly mention 10 year old Arun whose face and hands were burnt in an



accident- he filled the camp with his generous and pleasant presence. Arun spoke of his father's drinking habits, his mother's work-load and his wish to be an artist as he grew up. He and his sister promised to organize a program in the tribal school that they are studying in. The food in the camp was excellent, cooked by the volunteers of ACV and the mothers-it was delicious and a treat to see the children and mothers enjoy the various delicacies.

Alapad, Kollam District, Kerala

Alapad was chosen as the venue for the coastal camps as Valiyathura group was in a retreat in connection with Easter and so on. The Local Self Government or village Panchayat in Alapad extended all



The children belonged to the age group 10-14 and both boys and girls attended the program. The average number of children were 40.

The resource persons who came to the program in Alapad were Dr.Santhi on Environment, Sri.Suresh Elamon on films, Ms.Sandhya on Stories and the World of Reading and Mercy Alexander from Sakhi on Gender and Personality. There were story -telling sessions, music, film viewing and analysis, outdoor games and exercises. The camps were for 3 days and we were able to follow the pattern that was conceived originally in all the areas.

The highlights of the camp were the gifts given by Suresh Elamon, noted documentary film maker on environment to 3 children for



support for the program. Balavihar has been programs in the area in association with SAKHI -Resource Centre for Women. 3 camps were conducted in the area, 2 by Balavihar and one by SAKHI. This was to ensure maximum participation of children. The area is a 17km long strip of land sandwiched between the Arabian Sea on the west and the Kayamkulam backwaters in the east. The Alapad area erstwhile famous for the high quality coir and deposits of rare earth ilmenite and monazite has been in the lime light as it was worst hit by Tsunami.

The program was held in 3 locations-Cheriyazheekkal, Alapad and Azhekkal. Each one was organized with the support of the Women's Self Help Groups and also the active participation of the Panchayat.



their analysis of his short film on Water. A team of 4 participants in one of the camps who called themselves the Waves did a project on Water, Water Everywhere which was submitted to the VOLVO ADVENTURE AWARD program- we are happy to note that the project won a Special Runner up Award which included a certificate. Cash prize, and special gifts for them. The prizes were distributed by the Panchayat Standing Committee Chairperson on Education in a well-attended function.

Archana Women's Centre , Thellakam, Kottayam

The fourth program named HARITHOLSAVAM-2007 was held in the Archana Women's Centre in Thellakam, Kottayam District. The Centre has been doing innovative activities in the area and also other parts of Kerala which include giving training to women as masons, plumbers and electricians as part of their rural employment generation schemes. The characteristics of the area coincides with all the ones for which the Vilappilsala area near Trivandrum was selected. The food security of this village has been jeopardized by the monoculture



invasion of Rubber, the pollution of water sources from a Rubber Factory and the public agitation against it, There were 62 children of age group 8-16. The organizers have real grassroots connection which made it difficult to curb the number of participants.

After the initial inauguration and other formalities Ms.Geetha interacted with the children in an ice-breaking self-introduction session. This was followed by a session by Anitha of Balavihar who elicited responses from the children themselves on what they want from the camp. The children were all eager to be out in the field and learn more about nature-but heavy rains impeded outdoor activities. Mr.Vipin of the Archana Study Centre conducted a games and personality development session that was welcomed well.

of the program.

The camp was also special in that 5 girls from the Special Care Home of the YWCA in Kottayam could attend the program. They have been either deserted by the parents or their mothers are undergoing imprisonment for so called immoral activities and so on. The 5 girls between age group 10-15 showed exemplary capabilities to interact with the group, learn new skills and also express their talents. One child said " Who knows where we will be next year-we may be in some other care home -so let us enjoy!" .I am still in touch with them and they are still together in YWCA,Kottayam!

Exercises, Activities And Assignments Done:

The program included one or more of interactive sessions in which the basic approaches to personality development, civic sense, learning and knowledge acquiring, identifying one's own creativity and also understanding the cultural, ecological and social milieu from which one comes. The major learning happened in the game sessions, group work, team building activities and also observation and recording assignments.

The major activities that were done at an individual level were

Literary exercises-poem/ essay writing:

This was done in 2 ways. The children who expressed aptitude for writing poems were asked to do so. Here is an example of the output from Alapad program:

The Wind and the Flower by Anandhu Baby (13 years):

He came like a storm-wind

I withered like a flower



There was sessions on Ecology, Environment, Music and Arts. The program was for 3 days and we could follow the original pattern. The children were divided into groups based on the hobbies and interests -reading , writing, drawing, music and specific activities given as group work. The children in the group on Writing decided to make a pledge on Environment that was read out on 2 occasions.

The major highlights of the camp were

The participation of parents and staff of the Centre

The participation of 2 children with learning difficulties and symptoms of hyperactivity-we are glad that we could bring out the best in these children. I am still in touch with the mothers and was able to dialogue with them on how to handhold the creativity in these special children. They come from lower income group and to be able to direct them to a special clinic in Kottayam was a major outcome





The sea churns like a storm in my heart
Words of compassion reach as flowers
Like a storm he came and went
Leaving the children of sea in tears!

Rejitha wrote about Those Who fought with Death:
The seashore looks beautiful
The waves have the beauty of death
They killed the fishermen
The ocean was fuming when
The waves embraced the fisher folk
And the shore became barren.

The thoughts about the sea and tsunami linger paramount in the minds of the children even after so many years. The children in Azheekkal camp wrote about water:

14 year old Dhanya wrote thus:
Water, water everywhere, but..... runs the old adage
We too here in this tiny strip of land say so
The sea on one side and the lake on the other
Sandwiched is Alapad
Yet we walk long for water
Pots remain in vain
Queuing at public taps
The hollow sound of air
Rings loud
Where is the drop to drink???

The articles and stories did not express much innovative thought

which reflects that the children's literature available in popular magazines have a stereotyped style. The gap in perceiving the thought processes of the child is evident in the way it gets reflected back from the child.

The literary output was also encouraged to emerge as a group activity. The children of Thellakam wrote a pledge to conserve nature which was adopted as a common one:

I have to protect the trees that give me life-giving oxygen. It is my duty to preserve and protect Nature that has given me life and that is sustaining life. Though I will use all of nature's resources I will do so with the thought that it is to remain for the future generations too. I hereby firmly pledge to conserve life and nature.

The literary exercises were also in the form of scripts for skits and



small dramas. While the children of Alapad wrote about water and water conservation, the group in Vellarada performed a family scene with subtle references to gender discriminations and violence.

The children of Puravimala showed amazing capacity to make Cinquins, the French method of writing about a theme centering around the noun/verb, adjective of the same. Arun wrote about the

Wind

Wind

Powerful yet cooling

Full of rain or shine

Invisible and full

I love the wind.

The exercises given at individual level included a short piece on Why do I love my place?

The children of Thellakam wrote:

Vishnupriya (10yrs)

The village I live in is full of chlorophyll-filled trees and green fields. The Perur village has many cool streams and rivulets and small huts in which loving people live. How can I not love this place?

Prajeesh from Azheekkal wrote:

I love Alapad village because it is near the sea. The people here are strong and go out into the sea for fish. We belong to many caste and creed but there is lot of friendship here.

Divya (14yrs) from Vellarada wrote:

My village is poor- there is not much development here. No electricity or flowing water from taps. Yet we have something that money cannot buy- love and cooperation. There is bountiful nature and clean air and water. So I love this village.

Aruvi and Arun from Puravimala:

We went to the Trivandrum city one day and were afraid of the rush and

dust-noon has time for anything there. We longed to come back to our hamlet. Then we realized the worth of our village- the peace and harmony here in spite of all the poverty and lack of facilities. So we love it here.

The survey done as home assignments also revealed a lot of information on the places they came from. A basic framework for the survey was given at the end of the first day. The surveys included the Energy/Water consumption patterns at home, the Waste generated and what happens to it, the birds, trees and life around the homestead. The survey also gave space for finding practical solutions to issues that might have emerged in the process. The children of Alapad gave a resolution to the Local Self Government authorities who visited the camp demanding that

The local pond be cleaned and they be taught swimming

A permanent space for children be created in the Panchayat where their talents find expression.

A comprehensive plan be made to provide clean water to all.

The data from the survey was used as base material to prepare this resolution.

The biodiversity checklists were made into charts and posters and

put up for public display.

Major Learnings From The Program:

The basic hypothesis that exposing the underprivileged section of the society to a variety of skills would yield quick and better results has been proven beyond doubt by these interactions. The 4 2-3 day Life Skill Education programs in the 4 areas had provided more results and more follow-up and local motivation than the month long one that was held in Balavihar in 2006. The evidence of this is:

Action Council Vellarada is initiating a permanent setup for interacting with children in the areas. The children who attended the camps are demanding the creation of such a space. The children of Puravimala will also be met by ACV.

The Local Self Government in Alapad has come forward to set up



a space in the Panchayat that will handhold the young children both academically and otherwise. SAKHI has a resource centre in Azheekkal which can be made into a resource centre for children too. It has a good library and reading room also. The only lacking factor here is water supply. This can be solved by constructing a rain water harvesting unit – money has to be found for that!

The Thellakam Archana Centre already has a program for children, but it lacks a vision and also motivated personnel. The program that is being planned in December has a component for training the trainers in which local educated youth will be identified and trained to interact with the children.

The success of the program was due to

The involvement of groups with good local standing and rapport with the local community.

The participation of the endorsing agency- the Local Self Government.

The participation of the parents, especially the mothers and their active involvement in making food for the children.

The capacity of children to break all odds and be what they are- CHILDREN!!!