

I had heard about Pudiyador before and had been following their efforts through the website and newsletters. But that only gave me a superficial knowledge of their operations. I was genuinely curious to learn more, as I had my own interest towards understanding development in children. Given that curiosity, I jumped at the chance to observe their sessions. Although my visit spanned just 2 ½ hours, it was nevertheless a valuable life experience. Observing the children's activities and the efforts of session facilitators proved to be deeply educative and informative. Sticking to the rule of being unobtrusive was the hard part, as time and again the energy in the group urged me to participate in some way.

I must first express gratitude to the Pudiyador team for giving me this opportunity, particularly Ashwini (Director of Operations) and Uma (Program manager) for facilitating my visit and answering my follow-up questions regarding the programs. Today's visit was to observe the evening's children's programs at Urur Olcot Kuppam learning center. In addition to children's programs, Pudiyador also has regular women- and community-centric activities at different times of the day, as part of their efforts to provide wholistic support to their communities. I am sharing my experiences here so that, whoever reading this might also better understand and satisfy the same curiosity that I had about the Pudiyador operations.

The children's programs at the center are from 5.30pm to 7.30pm Monday to Saturday and at additional times as needed by the children of the community on Saturday. While observing the sessions, the commitment of the educators and program managers struck an inspiring chord. There are things that I had taken for granted in my educational experiences. But observing the facilitators leverage the available resources in the best possible way and compensating for any that is lacking with their efforts, gave me a totally new perspective on what is possible. Although I was introduced to the educators and program managers, much of what I share is based on what I learnt and inferred from my direct observations of the sessions in progress.

The program managers in addition to overseeing the different sessions that are simultaneously in progress, also assisted the educators in their efforts – managing a group of energetic children does seem to require an extra hand from time to time. In contrast to the silence and calm that is observed in a typical classroom environment, the children's sessions were filled with lively interactions from the start to finish. I could observe that the children felt more like at their home and community, rather than in a confined classroom. The methodology of all the sessions was inclined towards interactive learning, while encouraging active participation from the children. For example, for the 3 to 5 age group, after drawing a number on the board, the educator recited a mnemonic to remember the sequence of strokes. The educator then encouraged each child to come to the board and trace her path with their fingers over the original strokes, to better remember the pattern.

Many of the facilitators for the programs were also from the community. Participants in the youth program also volunteer as facilitators for earlier sessions involving younger children. The program manager explained to me that Pudiyador actively encouraged participation from their communities in all of its activities. Some of the other educators were also volunteers from partner organizations.

The sessions for the children were divided by age as – 3 to 5, 5 to 10, 10 to 14 and 15 to 29. Timings of the sessions were adjusted to better satisfy the needs of different age groups, while leveraging the space and resources available. The sessions were also divided among the two buildings - the clamor of the younger children in one building was in contrast to the more mature, organized and calm sessions of the teens and youth in another. There were water and restroom breaks for longer sessions. In addition, all the children were provided healthy evening snacks made in house, at the end of their sessions.

The “School bridge program” helped prepare children of 3 to 5 years age, for formal education in schools. The session was creative and exploratory and required the educators to have hands-on engagement of all the kids and all the time. Although the topics were rudimentary the children in this session were the most demanding and the educators could always use some extra hands.

The “Children’s program” was targeted for children in the 5 to 10 years age group. There were two simultaneous sessions dividing that age group by half according to age. There were in total four sessions with 2 parallel sessions each. This was done to provide a better educator-to-child ratio as demanded by these sessions. The younger children were taught conjugation of letters into words, and words into sentences, using teaching aid kits. The older children session was focused on introductory grammar. The educators tried to develop sustained interest and curiosity among the children through group involvement exercises. The high energy among the children meant that in addition to their teaching efforts, the educators also had to juggle with mischief management.

The “Teens program” addressed developmental challenges among the 10- to 14-year-olds. The educators focused on active involvement of the children, personality development and building of effective communication skills. There were multiple short sessions with water and restroom breaks. The breaks turned out to be equally interesting with the teens sharing interesting gossip on that day’s stories. Each short session started off with an introduction and highlighting of things to look out for. This was followed by the meat of the session where information was presented as a talk, a story or some audio-visual content. Finally, the teens were encouraged to derive their opinions and conclusions and also provide feedback on the content. The teens group displayed a sense of togetherness, self-motivation as well as, genuine interest in their participation. This meant that the educators and volunteers could manage and conduct a session for a larger group of 15 to 20 children. The sessions involved exploratory topics satisfying the “need to understand”, that is typical among teens. Among the sessions, the teens displayed greater attention and interest towards media (audio-visual) based sessions. Today’s focus was part of an 8-day program covering the “Senses, imagination and ghosts”.

The “Youth program” targeted young adults in the 15 to 29 age group - high school and junior college level. There was a stark, contrasting drop in the level of participation, specific to this group. The program managers acknowledged this and added that getting the community’s youth to participate has been a longstanding challenge. Many of the participants in this program were also facilitators of many children’s programs earlier in the day. The smaller group in one way facilitated and better suited the one-on-one interaction based English education that happened. Although English was part of the curriculum at school, their struggle with the subject was quite apparent, highlighting lack of good quality education at school level for English. Educators encouraged the participants to express and interact on topics that they experienced during the day, to gain a better and practical grasp of the language.

The children’s programs in the Pudiador learning centers leverage on what resources are available to best provide a powerful and interactive learning environment for the children. In addition to what is already being done, the facilitators could do much more, given additional resources. Educational kits for younger children, audio-visual equipment for teens and youth will definitely amplify the efforts of the educators. The programs as a whole are powerful, viable and effective models that could be replicated in other communities. Given the opportunity to be part of Pudiador for just one day, I look forward to my association on a longer timeframe and I will eagerly follow Pudiador’s journey in the years to come.