

Centre for Learning (CFL) Site Visit Report

Project Details

CFL (www.centreforlearning.org) is an alternative education centre that focuses on quality education. Started in 1982, CFL was envisioned as an alternative to the formal schooling system. The attempt is to making the learning process more meaningful and fun and to share their experience with other interested individuals/groups.

Volunteer Details

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Report

Background

Ram Krishnamoorthy of Asha-Bangalore had introduced me to Ram Koneripalli who teaches at CFL. I planned a visit with the intention of meeting Ram Koneripalli (henceforth referred to as 'Ram'!). I also wanted to learn more about CFL and find out if there's anything we could use from their experience with Asha-Hyderabad projects.

I took a bus to the Trimulgherry crossroads on the morning of the 11th and started walking towards CFL (it is about 4 k.m. from the crossroads). As we'd arranged previously, Ram came met me on the way on his bike and we rode back the rest of the way.

While I was chatting with Gurveen (Founder-Secretary of CFL) and Ram, a call came from Hareesh of Asha-Seattle updating Gurveen about the status of the project proposal at Asha-Seattle. Since a required site visit had not happened in the last year, when Hareesh learnt that I was around, he asked me if I could make my visit a "site visit" and I was happy to do so. This is how what started off as a courtesy call coincidentally turned into a site visit! Also, because of this, I wasn't carrying my camera and don't have pictures to add to this report.

Premises

CFL is located in its own premises in Trimulgherry, Hyderabad. The locality is a fairly new colony, increasingly surrounded by multi-storey apartments, on what would've been termed the outskirts of the city a few years back. On the way, there are a couple of *bastis* where the migrant workers (mostly from other parts of AP, but some also from UP/Bihar) who labour at the construction sites live. Ram mentioned that CFL had tried to approach them to see if they would send their children to school, but a direct "education focused" approach doesn't seem to work, since the parents can't see the value. They are now trying such things are running health camps at the school and seeing if the parents will send their kids for the checkup and then maybe influence them to send them to school.

The building is a 2-storey complex, with lots of light and air in the classrooms (they aren't enclosed on all 4 sides) and lots of drawings by the children, other artwork, posters, newspaper clippings etc. on the walls making for quite a colourful atmosphere. Bathrooms are in a slightly detached building. All the children have tiny painted desks and chairs, and drawing, colouring and writing equipment. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of space left in the compound for a playground. The building was designed by the parents of one of the students.

Children

CFL has children from two different kinds of backgrounds. The fee paying children (23 nos.) are from middle class or better families. The parents typically are either from NGO/activist type backgrounds who want their children to get a different kind of education, or other relatively well off people who have the same concerns. The sponsored children (40 nos. fully sponsored, 9 nos. ½ sponsored) are sons and daughters of labourers and domestic workers, mostly from the local area. The children stay in CFL until the 7th standard, take the public exam, and then go to regular schools. There are 31 girls and 41 boys.

The sponsored children have been there since inception in 1982. They came in as fee-paying students but mid year could not pay and stayed on without payment. Next year onwards they had donations/funding - off and on - to help keep the under-privileged children at CFL.

In 1985 it was decided to make fee-paying and sponsored children ratio 25:75 but after five or six years it was found that it could not be sustained as external funding support was not assured. After that the ratio has been 40% fee-paying and 60% sponsored.

CFL's experience has been that in general when their kids go to regular schools, they perform better than their peers. One of the reasons given is the emphasis on *understanding* the subject at a more fundamental level. Sometimes the kids in fact come back to CFL and ask them to explain what they are learning at school. One other side effect is that CFL children tend to question and critique what their teachers are saying more than other children, and this sometimes leads to them being thought of as impudent/irreverent. In my opinion, this can only be considered a heartening side effect! The desire for learning also makes them interact more with their teachers, sometimes resulting in the other kids labeling them "teachers pets" etc.

School Programme

School timings are from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. with a lunch break in between. There is a plan to extend the timings to 3 p.m. for the older children. The classes are from class I to class VII and of 45 minutes duration. Instead of following one state/central syllabus, the teachers use the texts from different syllabi (state, CBSE etc.) and try to glean the best and most relevant stuff and present that to the students. This is one way of ensuring that the teachers also learn the subject from different perspectives, and the students get the benefit of the best from the available resources. The primary medium of education is English, with Telugu as second language for the children who speak it at home, or Hindi.

Since some of the sponsored children aren't too comfortable with the English medium and the school environment when they enroll, CFL conducts something like a "bridge" class where these students can spend time getting to know the school environment better and also become comfortable with English. I happened to be able to catch a part of this class, and the approach is to have the children in a "round table" environment working on different concepts in English and basic arithmetic/counting. The medium of instruction is a combination of English and Telugu when needed. For example, the teacher will put something like "ant, elephant, hair, coal" on the board and ask the children to "tick everything that is black" or to "tick everything that is not an animal" etc. For numbers, the teacher might write something like "2, 3, 8, 12, 16, 20, 23, 29, 32" and ask them to "pick all the factors of 32". It's a very non-competitive, non-confrontational environment where everyone has a lot of fun!

Methodology

Each child is given individual attention and is given work according to his/her inclination and capabilities. This obviously makes the teacher's role greater than one of just imparting information. They have to monitor each child separately. Parent-teacher meetings are also conducted with individual parents. Rather than split the school into conventional "standards", children are grouped according to the educational level they are at. Sometimes there are some tough choices. For example, an older kid might be educationally at the level of some younger kids. In this case, is it better to place the kid with the younger kids who are at the same level so that performance-wise they are all in the same band, but at the risk of affecting the child's self-esteem (from being placed with younger kids)? Or is it better to go the other way round, where the kid is surrounded by other kids of the same age, but can't keep up with them educationally speaking? These are tough questions, and one aspect that makes CFL's handling unique, apart from the individual attention, is that they seek the child's opinion in the matter and make sure that the child is also comfortable with whatever is decided.

Apart from "conventional" subjects, the children are engaged in activities such as arts and crafts (embroidery, painting etc.) and also performing arts (singing, dancing, dramatics etc. – one of the parents takes a singing class every week). Almost every year they have a sleep-over (two nights and three days) at CFL with all children above 8 years old.

When financially possible, the older children (10+ years) are taken on an educational trip once a year to some place outside Hyderabad. The idea is to choose places that can give the children an educational experience - for example this year the plan is to take them to a site of Samuha, an organization based in Karnataka that works in the rural areas of Karnataka in the areas of education, livelihoods, and women's rights.

During lunch break, some of the children eat from their own lunch boxes, while a mid-day meal has been organized for the others. The motivation for this was that they started noticing that some of the sponsored children were drowsy/inattentive in class when they came in the morning. The idea started off with a salad as a supplement, but is now a full but simple meal (rice, dal/sambar, one curry).

Teachers/Staff

Of the current teachers/staff members, Gurveen is a Ph.D. and has been with CFL from the beginning and is the main motivating force behind the initiative. She struck me as someone who has given careful thought to both the philosophical/pedagogical aspects of CFL as well as the practical issues such as sustainability, continuity, etc. Ram has joined recently and was from an IT background and then worked with the Azim Premji foundation in Madnapalle, before moving to CFL and Hyderabad. In parallel he is doing an MA in Education from TISS. The other teachers are all relatively new hires.

Two pre-primary teachers have completed 10th class, the two primary school teachers are graduates, three volunteers are graduates, one volunteer is a post-graduate. Two more teachers who will be joining in November have other higher qualifications.

CFL has faced severe hiring problems because no one was available for the salaries offered initially (Rs. 3500 or so) and even now the salary isn't exactly great.

There was a mini HR crisis last year when 3 teachers who between them had over 30 years experience at CFL had to leave in one go for various reasons (having to spend more time at home, moved house to a much farther location etc.) One of them had been groomed as someone who could take over from Gurveen who could then focus on other programs such as teacher training etc. The situation is now in control because new teachers have been found, but Gurveen has to predictably spend more time in day-to-day activities because of the relatively inexperienced teachers. One positive aspect about this is that unlike many other organizations, plans had been put in place to develop a strong “second line” by the founders, and unfortunate coincidental circumstances led to the “second line” leaving in one fell swoop.

Apart from the larger issues around curriculum/methodology/sociology that they tackle, the big problem that CFL has to face is that of finding and retaining good teachers. Gurveen emphasized that “good teachers” is not synonymous with “qualified teachers” since typically there is a lot of “unlearning” that is involved with their approach. The conventional teacher-student relationship that involves the teacher lecturing and the student as an unquestioning, uncritical listener is challenged and this takes some getting used to. Apart from this, the salaries need to be at a realistic level commensurate with the expectations of the teachers. The minimum would be a government teacher’s pay scale.

Other Activities

CFL also conducts health checkups for the students and publishes a newsletter on education related topics named “Edu Care” twice or thrice a year. Interactions with parents include meetings, and discussion sessions. For example, something that was dealt with last week was on how to wean children away from TV. In some cases, parents have to be made aware of nutrition related aspects. For example, some parents thought that giving their child “Maggi noodles” or other such pre-packaged food was a sign of “progress”, rather than *dal-roti* and leafy vegetables – such is the power of mass media and marketing! In other cases, parents have to be made sensitive to the fact that the children at CFL are from different socio-economic backgrounds and that they have to take care to be non-discriminatory in whatever they do. For example, if a fee-paying child is having a birthday party, *all* her classmates have to be invited, not just the fee-paying classmates. The staff at CFL is very aware of these situations and work proactively to make sure that no slip-ups occur.

Apparently both fee-paying and sponsored parents feel the meetings are worthwhile and that they learn from it but the impact is not a hundred percent and implementation of suggestions varies from person to person and family to family regardless of class. Main drawback is largely the women attend but are not in a position to enforce decisions at home – they have succeeded in drawing in more fathers but are working further on this.

Future Plans

Plans are on to set up an “Adult Learning Network”, to sensitize parents/others to issues related to modern schooling in particular and living in general.

The long term plan is to transform CFL into a resource centre. The activities will be

- Children's education
- Public education – reaching out to young adults in colleges and the corporate world AND parent/public education. Also through the publication of Edu-Care.

- Teacher training.
- Also plan to meet once a month with other individuals (working in other alternative spheres and mainstream spaces) to learn from their personal and professional activities. Then pool together the learning to make interventions more focused, sharper and up-to-date with emerging issues.

Impressions from the visit

- Overall it was heartening to learn about this largely successful experiment in education, which is different enough that the children benefit greatly from it, and yet close enough to the regular curriculum that they don't have too many problems adapting to regular school after CFL.
- The motivation levels of the founders/staff are very high and the longevity of CFL is a testament to this. This is a group that has given serious thought to education and schooling issues, and wants to genuinely take a different path.
- One consequence of this approach is that it can't scale very easily. Not only does the student teacher ratio have to be maintained, but the right kind of teachers have to be found, and at this point it isn't a model for "mass production".
- More "bare earth" playground space would be a great addition to otherwise impeccable facilities.