



La Ferme Des Crocodiles

a French Non-Government Organization dedicated to providing sustainable help to children in India

Hariksha Learning Centre Visit Report

On November 24, 2010, I had the opportunity to spend a whole day at the *Hariksha Learning Centre for CP/MC Children in Avalurpet*, Tamil Nadu. Here are my observations and suggestions further to this visit.

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Observations

1. The staff

What impressed me first, and throughout the day, is the competence and dedication of all the staff. I know some centers that have to rely exclusively on well-intended persons that do their best without any formal training. I have visited other institutions, small or large, where trained professionals perform their duties as a routine, in a sort of “mechanical” way. Hariksha Learning Centre is blessed to have people who are not only competent but who also clearly demonstrate that they are caring of the challenged children placed under their responsibility. It’s much more than just knowing which physical exercises are required or which activity is appropriate for the next mental development challenge. These jobs require endless patience and the capacity to see in each tiny step a sign of progress. I feel I found this positive attitude in all the persons there, at all times.

This remark also applies to the ladies who are “helpers” (neither physical therapists nor specialized educators): I was observing from a distance and I never saw them lose their calm or become rough or distant. One can easily imagine that some people could lose their smile when having to give some children a change of clothes several times in the day because these children cannot control their body functions. To sum up, before being professionals or caretakers, these persons are mothers, in the fullest and most beautiful sense; their attitude shows this and it makes all the difference.

Sometime after being in charge, managers are fully responsible for the quality of their staff, be it on the bright side or on the low side. So Mrs. Sujatha and Mr. Ravi must be commended for having chosen the most appropriate persons, trusted and empowered them, and leading them so that they make up a real team.

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2. Real professionalism with a will to explain, share and unite

Among the services rendered to the children and their families, I found four aspects to be very impressive:

- In both fields of physiotherapy exercises (for physically-challenged children) and educational activities (for mentally-challenged children), the choices seem adequate and complete, though some aspects go beyond my knowledge and professional experience (I started my professional activities as a specialized educator, over 30 years ago). There seems to be a good adequacy between the necessary development activities and the equipment available, although I would not be surprised if Mrs. Sujatha and Mr. Ravi indicated that the purchase of complementary equipment would be useful.
- Organizing and explaining. I'll take two examples. The first one is the simple handwritten chart placed by the electrotherapy equipment. The chart lists the children who benefit from this therapy, where it is specifically applied and why. You might think it's only normal to explain and post this. True, but it's not always the case, far from it. Second example: day-to-day activities, individually and in small groups. The daily schedule, also handwritten and posted, shows who does what, when and why. I stress the fact that this indicates made-to-measure education, the recognition that each child is unique and that her or his special situation needs to be addressed in a tailored way.
- Coordination between staff; monitoring. Such systematic explanations help each adult relate to the co-workers' activities and thus feel part of a whole, integrated in a broader process. All the activities chosen are defined in such a way that the results can be measured. Progress is regularly monitored and achievements are expressed in percentile points. This is the backbone of all the work: three-month plans, for each child, that enable to see clearly where progress is made in order to go on to the next step, the next challenge.
- Reporting to parents. The monthly meetings are the opportunity to see all the parents together (generally the mothers). Of course, the staff owes the parents a report on their child's situation (although this is unfortunately not considered necessary by some institutions) and it also integrates the parents to the life of Hariksha Learning Centre, beyond their child's personal situation; it is a way to make individuals feel part of an ongoing project.

3. Outstanding procedure documentation

Westerners with a superficial experience of this country might be tempted to feel that all Indians are fatalistic, happy-go-lucky people who give little importance to organization. India is of course a country of many facets and an institution like Hariksha is one of the examples that would prove these Westerners wrong.

I was shown all the folders, relative to each aspect of the organization of the learning centre. I took the time to go through all the procedures. They encompass absolutely everything. Writing this thorough documentation is time-taking but far from useless. Not only does it give every Hariksha "actor" (or inspector, or financial contributor) a clear vision of the what's and why's, but it is also a reference in case of a problem. It's good to go back on these documents regularly to see if there has been any drifting, any discrepancies, or if the situation has evolved to the extent that there should be some updating. These procedure documents are like a map, showing the goals and actions of the institution and serving as a reference - a sort of positioning system - to ensure that the initial vision is respected. I found that the whole of this documentation was up to ISO 9000 quality standards as they illustrate that golden rule: say what you do and do what you say.

4. **A vision for a dignified life.**

This is first found in some educational objectives: enabling some mentally-challenged children to develop skills that will make it possible for them, as adults, to be more autonomous than they are at present (for instance: to be able to take a bus alone or to know how to use money).

But this is also found in the Savings Bank Passbook scheme. Some children, in the course of their manual skills training, make embossed paintings or objects made of decorated ice-cream sticks. These objects are later sold, for example at charity events. The money earned by the sale is given to the children: a small portion of it can be used by the parents for the purchase of some foods but most of the money is put on the child's savings account, ensuring that this small capital will be accessible to the child only, when becoming a young adult. These are examples that demonstrate a true will to help challenged children become more autonomous and self-sufficient, in other words to have access to a dignified life.

Suggestions

5. **Purchase of a large vehicle**

This is not a suggestion in the sense that the managers and trustees of Hariksha are well aware that such a purchase – which represents an important budget – is *the* investment that would make a great and most positive change in the everyday running of the learning centre. For the moment, Hariksha does not have the necessary budget to consider buying a large vehicle in which all the children could be carried in the same time. Presently, a small van with driver is rented on a monthly basis and it makes three rounds in the morning to pick up the children in their homes and another three rounds to bring them back. This means for example starting at 7 AM, with the third and last morning round at 9.45 AM. In the same way, the activities have to stop at 3.30 PM. Clearly, if there was only one round thanks to a larger vehicle, there would be more time for working with the children. The cost of operating and maintaining a large vehicle would be less than the present rental costs with three routes. Our organization has started provisioning funds in view of contributing to the purchase of a vehicle and we would be most happy to learn that another NGO would like to take part in the project!

6. **Using IT tools to monitor the 3-month plan results for each child**

I am not in a position to judge whether information technology equipment would be an asset or if it would only make things more complex. The monitoring as it is performed presently (paper and pen) may be adequate and sufficient. I think that some software could possibly visualize more clearly the evolution, particularly on longer periods. I did not think of discussing this with Mrs. Sujatha and Mr. Ravi when I was with them, but if they believe that computerizing the data could help, then I would definitely vouch for the funding of such equipment.

7. Purchase of backup batteries

There are many power cuts on a daily basis. Some rooms have small windows, others have none. Children and staff are therefore pretty much in the dark several times a day and have to use kerosene lamps to have a bit of light. Kerosene means some smoke and is always a hazard, especially in the presence of children. On the day of my visit, I was happy to announce that our organization would fund the purchase of backup batteries.

8. A paint job?

The house which shelters the learning center is kept clean. There is, however, the normal consequence of a thousand times little hands and feet putting smudges on the walls. I understand that, as a manager, one would hesitate to spend money on a rented house. But I do believe that a fresh coat of paint in some areas would make it a nicer-looking, more welcoming place. In the future, when Hariksha Learning Centre becomes the owner of premises, the solution would certainly be to put ceramic tiles on the walls for easy maintenance.

9. More furniture

There is a habit, particularly in rural areas, to sit and work on the floor, and this is not at all disturbing. Some children with a special challenge already benefit from ergonomic chairs or tables for their comfort or safety. Perhaps could this also be extended to someone like Kalaiselvi, the 17-year-old girl who suffers from severe scoliosis? She presently does embossed painting sitting on the floor.

10. Educational gardening

In the back of the house, there is a little patio with a well and a small patch of unused ground; the soil seems fit for growing vegetables. Perhaps could this be used to start a little garden? The work would be adapted to some children, both those with a physical challenge or a mental one.

It could be another project of empowerment and self-sufficiency development, to help improve and practice their sense of responsibility and teamwork. The garden produce, though modest in quantity, could be added to the daily menus and would certainly make the children feel proud of their work. The interest of organic growing (and, by comparison, the dangers of using chemicals) could be taught. Using the rainwater from the roofs, stored in a tank, would also be a rather easy and inexpensive opportunity to conform to the rainwater harvesting request made by a government inspector on his last visit report.

I am thankful to Mrs. Sujatha and Mr. Ravi for having given me the opportunity to spend a day at Hariksha Learning Centre. I ask them to please extend to the staff my appreciation for the very fine work they are doing and my gratitude for the care and humaneness with which they are helping challenged children to grow and develop their special potentials.

“Be human and serve Human”
is undoubtedly what the team is doing.