Deepanam School (2016-17)

Introduction

The work of Deepanam School is based on the principles and thoughts on education put forward by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It aims to achieve integral development of the students and to cultivate a joy and love of learning.

The school caters to children of ages 7 to 14. Currently there are three mixed-age classroom groups: ‘Light’ (7-8 years old), ‘Peace’ (9-11 years old) and ‘Faith’ (12-14 years old).

Light group (7-8 years old)

This year our class included 16 children. They were a happy, enthusiastic and curious group. ‘Love to learn’ was one of the main attributes of the group, both children and teachers. We enjoyed working together as well as with the other facilitators who offered various ideas and activities for nurturing the children’s creativity.

Our class explored clay modeling, crafts, painting, gardening, science, field studies, Awareness Through the Body (ATB), singing, and languages.

We see that children love to feel responsible and independent, and keeping this in mind we encouraged them to participate in deciding on rules together, setting daily duties, and choosing among options in their work plan.

Working through projects is another tool which makes the learning process very organic. Our main two projects of the year were ‘animals’ and ‘story building’ (creative writing). These themes became windows to other areas of learning. We also included theater performances as a way of fostering learning, completing our projects with a drama and presentation.

Peace group (9-11 years old)

This year Peace group included 18 children. Some of our activities were:

- **Visiting the Matrimandir**: At Deepanam we are lucky to have the Matrimandir on our doorstep. This year, Peace group visited Matrimandir every Tuesday, to help clean the petals and surrounding areas. We learned about the qualities, colours and order of the petals from Tulsi. John shared about the technical aspects of the building. The aim of this project was to create a connection with this special place and to go beyond the classroom.

- **Mime, waste and birds projects**: For the first two terms, the children were engrossed in learning to mime, and finally gave a performance for the community. The second term was focused mainly on a WasteLess project with the assistance of Ribhu and Chandrah. The children learnt about recycling, reuse and packaging, as well as the coding of plastics through games and different activities. The term also included a project on birds, which involved bird watching in and around Auroville and at Kaluveli Tank.

- **Auroville week**: During this special week in February, the children were familiarised with the Charter of Auroville. For this, the young students from Last School came to explain the Charter. We also visited Savitri Bhavan where Shraddhavan further explained it, so that the children understand it from a different perspective. The children later gave a presentation on the Charter for their parents.

- **Tamil Nadu project**: The last term focused on a project on Tamil Nadu, during which the children learned about the history, geography and culture of the state. The students created
a puppet-drama based on what they learned, using puppets made in their crafts class. *(See following report: ‘Integrating Art, Craft and Puppetry with Regular Academics’.)*

- **Creative writing:** The students wrote stories which they illustrated and presented in the form of comics.

**Faith group (12-14 years old)**

This year Faith group included 20 students. Primary emphasis was given to performance arts and hands-on learning. The aim was on developing academic skills, life skills and cultivating character-building experiences. This year’s curriculum subjects were: science, mathematics, English language and literature, social studies, technology, geography, Tamil and French.

- **Literature, History and Theatre projects:** We see history and literature as closely related, and that literature can help history come alive. With this approach, students studied Egyptian stories (“Cleopatra on the Nile”), Greek myths, and Arthurian legends. An hour-long comedy play, “King Arthur: The Legend of The Lost Excalibur”, was performed in February for parents and friends. The students were involved in designing costumes, painting the set and making props. For the end-of-year Open House, the students also performed in the play “Helen of Egypt”, which presented the Egyptian side of the story of the Trojan War.

- **Great Poets project:** In this project, students were familiarized with life and works of Blake, Tennyson, and Wordsworth and were introduced to the Romantic movement. The junior class presented Blake’s work through song at the school fête in February. The project enabled the students to appreciate and be inspired by poetry, and for some to develop a love for it.

- **History of Art:** Corinna offered art history classes to the older students of the group. In each class, an artist’s life, works, and movement of art were introduced. They studied Picasso, Chagall, da Vinci and Van Gogh.

- **The Journey of rice, from seed to plate:** *(See project report: ‘Growing food in Auroville Schools’, p.168.)*

- **Service Week:** Every year a community service week is organized for the students. It gives them the opportunity to learn about the world of work in Auroville. Units that welcomed the students included Matrimandir, PTDC, Foodlink, Naturelement, Free Store, Lively Boutique, Kindergarten, Nandanam, Shraddhanjali, Baraka, AuroOrchard, Bamboo Centre and Buddha Garden.

- **Puppet show:** Gabriel from Upcycling Studio offered a puppet-making workshop for the students. Recycled material was used to make animal puppets. The students chose a story and made the characters accordingly. They also built a puppet theater out of waste boxes and fabric. The final result was a puppet show performed at the school’s fundraising event.

- **Electronics at STEM Land:** Every Thursday, Faith group visited STEM Land at Udavi School for electronics class. It was a wonderful opportunity for the students to do electronics and tinker with certain materials. We started with learning about basic electronics and went on to build bamboo torches and oscillators.

- **‘Genius Hour’:** We had the idea that once a week, an hour could be devoted to working on each individual student’s passion. This became ‘Genius Hour’. Photography, fashion design, and foreign languages were some of the topics chosen by students. The students were provided with resources from within and outside the school to facilitate their learning.

- **Use of MOOCs in the classroom:** Some of the students were keen to learn specific subjects such as animation and programming, and this was made possible through the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) we could access through the National Knowledge Network. The students were self-motivated and willing to learn through this medium.
• **Class blog:** Finally, we have a class blog which students write and maintain (faithclass.wordpress.com). Parents can browse and see the activities happening in the classroom.

**Common programs at Deepanam School**

Several activities are offered to all the age groups at Deepanam. This year these included:

• **Painting:** Learning to express oneself without the pressure of being judged was the aim of the painting classes. The students explored different art techniques and media (printmaking, puppetry, moving toys, pop-ups, pencil, charcoal, paint, collage). The evolution of visual art was also explored (ancient paintings, the Middle Ages, and the modern era).

• **Clay:** Students from Light and Peace attended clay classes once a week. They learned and practiced various techniques such as pinching, moulding, rolling, cutting and printing clay. The children produced forms of animals, foods, pots, architecture, figures, decorations, aliens, dinosaurs, insects and many other weird and wonderful things!

• **Crafts:** Students from Light and Peace groups attended craft classes twice a week. Activities included the making of masks, puppets, dolls, houses, flowers, festive decorations, bracelets, dream catchers and more. Techniques included crochet, knitting, sewing, beading, embroidery, quilling, paper, rolling, patchwork, and origami. This work develops students’ fine motor skills and demands focus and concentrated attention, complementing academic study.

• **Gardening:** Students from Light and Peace groups attended gardening classes once a week. Deepanam has a beautiful school garden, which recently has been developed with permaculture principles in mind. This year each group was given a raised bed in the garden where they were able to plant, nurture, observe, harvest and cook different vegetables, fruits and herbs. Besides being responsible for their beds, the students learnt about the importance of the soil and how to nourish it by constantly giving back organic matter (mulch!). They learnt about the plant life cycle, different seeds, preparing food fresh from the garden, soil composition and decomposition, and how to build different types of garden beds. Thanks to our volunteers, we also made a film about building a bed in the garden.

• **Life Science:** Students from Light, Peace and Faith groups took Life Science classes each week. Deepanam benefits from its own Life Science Lab which accommodates fresh and saltwater aquariums, terrariums, and a snake pit, which the students actively participate in maintaining and cleaning. The students are able to design and create habitats, and to closely observe and handle the snakes which are our temporary guests. This year the students learnt a lot about shells from Bruce, who showed and commented on his phenomenal collection of different shells from around the world.

• **Languages:** Language classes are offered to students of Deepanam according to their needs and level. The two main languages taught are Tamil and French, although tailor-made classes can be offered on request (e.g. Hindi and Japanese). For the main languages, two groups of students are formed: native speakers and foreign learners. Teachers use literature, films and games to make the contact with the languages fun and accessible.