

A New Venture...another Milestone

Having successfully introduced the Montessori Method in a couple of corporation schools Sri Ramacharan Charitable Trust ventured into new territory with a little trepidation and much hope – introducing the Montessori Method in balwadis* in Chennai.

After scouting several balwadis the Trust selected the one at Luz Avenue, which houses two balwadi centers. The building for this balwadi with two rooms, washrooms and a kitchen has been excellently constructed by Lufthansa Airlines.

Inauguration:

After initial hiccups, we got the permission to work here from the concerned authorities under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme and held the inauguration on August 23rd 2007. The work done at the Corporation School, Mylapore was being showcased to many potential donors and one of them, Shrishti, offered to sponsor the cost of Montessori Materials and the indoor and outdoor play equipment. Infrastructural expenses including expenses incurred towards plumbing, electrical work, cementing the pathway and creating a sand play area were also generously borne by them. Photos can be viewed in the link <http://picasaweb.google.com/sriramacharantrust>

Identification of problems

On starting work, we found that children were worse off than at the corporation schools. Only parents who had no other choice would send their children to balwadis. Parents could expect that their children be fed and allowed to stay there until they return from work and nothing more. There is little or no teaching. There is no organized activity and they are not even given toys, which is sad. Some children play and fight with each other and some sit around listlessly.

Teachers at the balwadis are expected to perform well, not in the sense of taking care of children, but to collect as many children as possible in their centers. The frenzy for collecting children is crazy. Ayahs are sent to the neighboring slum for this purpose. The ayahs go to as many homes as possible and pick up as many children as they can. Most children have not brushed or bathed and are brought or come in dirty, soiled clothes. Sometimes parents are away at work and the children may be wandering unclothed. It is the ayahs, who have to dress the child and bring him to the center!

Although balwadis are meant for children between 2-6 years, the ayahs bring even those below 2 years to show a large attendance. A few of these children are still breast-feeding. They keep on crying and cannot be consoled. Most of these small children wet their pants and are never washed or changed!

There are around 30- 35 children, some below 2 years, some between 2-4 years, and very few who are above 4years.

* Balwadi is a childcare center for slum children supported by the Central Government through the ICDS Scheme

We found that no support can be expected from the teachers, as they are busy maintaining registers and are very often away on fieldwork in the concerned slums monitoring health of pregnant and feeding mothers, advising family planning etc. The ayahs are also unavailable for help because by the time they come back from their trip of collecting the children, they are tired. Besides, they have to do the cooking.

Rectification

The Trust has taken the following initiatives for efficient functioning and maximum benefit.

1. Two Montessori trained teachers have been appointed.
2. To make work manageable and more effective the children were divided into two groups. One environment was made into a Montessori environment. The older children (those who are above 2 ½ years old or otherwise ready) work here.
3. In the second room, only preliminary materials are displayed. The little ones here (those below 2 years or not otherwise ready) are initiated into the Montessori Method. There are play equipments like indoor slide, seesaw etc. and toys. The children may play, or work with the preliminary materials. If, the teacher feels they are ready, she may send them to the adjacent Montessori Environment.
4. Outdoor play equipment has also been ordered and expected shortly.
5. The Trust has appointed two ayahs to take care of all the needs of the little ones. While one of the teachers guides those who show interest in working with the materials, the ayah engages the others. She talks and comforts the babies who are crying and takes care of toilet accidents. The ayah is a good nanny. She also bathes and dresses children who come dirty. The Trust has a store of new and second hand clothes collected for this purpose.
6. The bigger children have wonderfully settled in their new Montessori environment and are working beautifully with the materials. As is always our experience children learn and absorb quickly.
7. The children who are segregated for the first session gather in one room for the next session. They recite slokas and do the 'silent activity'. Children love the mass recitation of prayers and slokas. Most amazing is how the children, even the tiniest ones maintain pin drop silence during silent time. At this point, when children are receptive, teachers address them collectively on the necessity of hygiene, cleanliness, good habits etc. Then the teachers may show the children how they must use the available materials in the right manner. Collective activities are done and the teacher gives everyone a turn and tries to keep them involved.
8. Children love the singing session. The older ones repeat the lines and the actions beautifully. The tinies who cannot sing yet watch keenly and may attempt a few actions and mutter a few words. We know that children learn from observation and absorption. It is interesting to watch the little ones watching the others sing.
9. The Trust is also planning to provide uniforms to the children and bring in a pediatrician once a month to monitor the health of the children.

In short, the work at the balwadi aims at **Complete Child Care**.

Parent's reactions

It is interesting to note that when our teachers were instructing the children to have a bath everyday and come in clean, washed clothes the balwadi teachers were a bit perturbed by this obsession. They refused to talk to the parents on this issue and advised us against these efforts saying that children may stop coming. However, the children themselves became champions of our cause. They have reportedly insisted on having bath and dressing neatly said some parents proudly.

Parents are obviously very happy that the children are occupied with various activities through the day. They are immensely happy that there is discipline, orderliness and cleanliness. A couple of parents said that their children are always singing the songs they learnt at school. The fact that we teach English words and sing English Songs is a great attraction and word has been going around that we are running an 'English Medium School'!

The balwadi teachers, though not helpful are very appreciative of our work. They have reported our good work to the Child Project Development Officer (CDPO). The CDPO is being asked by other teachers as to why only the Luz center is enjoying this exclusive assistance!

Smooth Sailing

To conclude the Trust is extremely happy to have cast off successfully. The problems that seemed like stumbling blocks turned out to be just teething problems and have been tackled suitably and effectively in a short span of time.

Efforts have been fruitful in large part because of the team of dedicated teachers who have worked hard to streamline the work and continue with commitment to improve and set standards for themselves and the Trust.