


## Alumni writings

**In our learning as teachers about young people's worlds, our former students are among our most valuable resources and critics! For the purpose of this document, we requested several of our alumni to write about being educated in a CFL environment, in an atmosphere that investigated learning without fear. Here are their responses.**

 It was five minutes past ten; the bell had been rung, and most girls were making their way to their rooms after signing the roll-call in the hostel, while I was rushing in the opposite direction to the warden's room. Since I fell asleep early, I had missed the ritual of roll-call after the hostel doors had been locked. The warden was furious, and I was to stand before her guilty for what I had done. Instead I asked her whether an exception could be made on the days when one was unwell or wanted to sleep early. She was appalled that I had asked her such a thing. It was considered to be rude and disrespectful towards authority. Given that it was my first week in college, I was yet to get used to the new environment and its rules. That night, I thought about the various ways in which CFL had been able to do away with the more obvious structures of power and fear that were prevalent in educational institutions. I had always known of it theoretically, but it came to me as a more tangible realisation that night.

However, life in CFL was challenging in other ways. For instance, one could not only choose activities one felt inclined towards, but one also had to be part of a whole host of classes and work—painting, sports, academics, fitness, crafts, trekking and dancing. It didn't matter if you were not good at something: you still had to do it. Of course a non-competitive environment makes it easier to delve into new fields. But there is an ego battle to fight, when you have to be comfortable doing something you cannot do very well, and to keep at it as well. It loosens the stranglehold of a society and economy whose rationale is that if you cannot capitalise on a skill, it is not worth acquiring or exploring. The thought of not "performing well" then becomes terrifying, and one loses the ability to experiment within one's own field of work or even in other areas.

Some of these notions of education and learning are reworked in CFL in such a way as to significantly

subvert the way school as an institution is normally perceived: an establishment that is meant to inculcate obedience towards older people, towards the rules of an institution, the state, allegiance towards a nation, religion. But when you are asked to question in order to learn, you create a space where you are likely to rethink the rationale associated with various practices, beliefs and systems. This form of dissipating power does subvert the "order" schools are generally expected to facilitate.

One of the most important symbols of the "normal order" is the unambiguous understanding of hierarchy within home, school or society. The absence of familiar forms of hierarchies within the teacher/administrative body, the student community, or between these two is significant. Historically, student monitors were considered important links in the management of the school. They weren't meant to be tell-tales. Student monitors were to be given limited power to sort out some of the problems they came across among the student groups so that they felt responsible for maintaining the established order in the school, and probably make them fiercely loyal towards the institution.


However, in CFL the responsibility towards the place and people is introduced through one's active participation within the community beginning with community work (the time set aside for cleaning the campus everyday by the students and teachers), *rota* (involvement in kitchen chores) and the frequent discussions that take place within small groups of the class, or larger ones comprising the entire senior school. The learning that took place in these spaces was valued as much as that within the classroom. Thus I feel that a large part of the learning that takes place in CFL occurs through one's participation in the community.

The only kind of fear that I remember from my memory of school is a fear of

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not-belonging-to-the-place, or one of isolation while apparently being a member of the community. A largely homogeneous body of people unwittingly does create an environment where a certain culture comes to be valued. If one came from a family or a place where one had access to the same culture, it seemed to make one a more likely member of the community. The engagement between cultural spheres seemed more difficult to come by than to familiarise oneself with the language of the community, and this made some people more hesitant participants within the school. Overlapping cultural worlds didn't mean that there were no rifts or issues people faced in school, but some felt more at ease in voicing their views or opposition, and manoeuvring through the peer dynamics and the dynamics within the larger community. This sometimes makes me wonder whether alternative schools are meant to cater to people whose worlds more or less fit in with the philosophies of the institution, or whether it's an understanding of education that these schools wish to take forward with those who are willing to experiment with new forms of learning. However, the latter case would require an engagement with different cultural worlds in order to make school a more open space of learning.

**Chaitra Sreeshaila graduated from CFL in 2009. She completed her Master's in modern Indian history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and is currently working as a research assistant on education in Mysore during the colonial period.**

 I was seven years old when I joined Centre For Learning. At that time, I had already attended a year of public school, and so had already learned to fear subjects like math and English, which I had struggled with at my last school. I knew that I needed extra help in math. I also struggled in English with grammar, as well as simple things like how to distinguish between the alphabets "b" and "d". In public school, these things would get me painful hits on my knuckles as punishment, and a perverse incentive to "do better". One of the outcomes of experiencing this kind of punishment was that I became afraid to ask questions in class and voluntarily seek extra help for the greater part of my remaining school years. I can still vividly recall the common theme in my yearly reports at CFL and at every parent teacher meeting; teachers would write, "She is afraid to ask questions and participate in class."

The public school education I experienced felt like a large amount of accumulating information and knowledge from text-books in the form of memorisation, and it had nothing to do with how you grow as a person or understanding yourself and your interests. There is in these schools a fear that you will fail everything and not pass the class. A fear that can inhibit learning by harbouring low self-confidence that leads to an inability to learn or retain information. Trying to learn under constant fear of various factors causes so much stress that all of one's attention and energy is channelled into managing it rather than learning.

However, a CFL education is not only about memorising texts and getting good grades. It is a holistic education, with emphasis on the process of learning. The education also explores what it means to be human beings, learning to change habits, communicate, live with others and learning the whole process of life. In this sense, education has no end. It is an education free of fear or at least it attempts to be free of pressures and punishment faced by students in other schools.

This was the new environment that I came into as a seven year old. Although I continued to struggle

with certain things, my difficulties were always met with compassion. My teachers would devote extra time and talk me through concepts in order to show that I can learn at my own pace. Reaching the ninth grade brought on the pressures and stress of examinations for the first time in our lives. Often pressure can make one achieve things faster, whether it's in the workplace or at school, without actually learning or enjoying the process or gaining a truly in-depth understanding of the subject.

My recollection of my first examinations at age 15 is of my teachers trying to convey to us, over and over again, to forget the pressures of achieving excellent grades. Instead the emphasis was to learn concepts inside out, focus on the process of learning, and do our best on the exam day because that is what matters. This was done through many discussions about fears and by challenging the stereotypical things that conventional society values. The foundation was the desire to challenge and question what surrounded us. Why do we have these fears? Why are we shy to ask questions or get help? Why do we feel the need to conform to society's expectations? Why is fear so ingrained in our psychology and behaviour? By the time we had to take our twelfth grade exams, we all felt a lot more confident in our study and preparation.

Meanwhile, my interest in arts and the natural world was highly encouraged by my teachers. I received space to explore nature and carry out small nature studies. Ultimately, this encouragement influenced me to pursue my interests and complete a four-year degree in environmental science in the USA. I built good relationships with my college teachers, and I was no longer shy to ask questions or seek extra help. This openness to learning and collaborating led to many opportunities I would have not had otherwise.

Education without fear does not mean you are free of fear. It means you have a space and a support system to challenge your fears and learn to deal with them. It is an education which provides the opportunity to examine yourself, your interests, strengths and

weaknesses, and to eventually choose your life's passion. It is also an education in which you learn to interact with others, be sensitive to your surroundings yet assert your own beliefs, learn when to ask for help, and deal with whatever comes your way.

**Gowri Varanashi graduated from CFL in 2009 and went on to study in the US. She received a Bachelor's degree in environmental studies with a minor in biology from Bard College in 2014. She currently works as a field guide at Tamandua Expeditions, an eco-tourism company working to conserve rainforest in the Peruvian Amazon. She also works with other conservation organisations within the US.**



I was asked to write a piece on my experience of the CFL education and how it dealt with the topic of fear. What follows is an attempt to bring together my thoughts on this matter. Consider this piece my testimony to a system that supported me through a crucial period in my life.

The closer we got to graduating from CFL, the more I heard people talking about our school as this hermetically sealed system that we were in and that it was nothing like the real one we were about to enter. I remember being anxious about what was to come. I remember our attempts to describe and compare CFL with everything that wasn't CFL. CFL was treated as an exception to the rule, the rule being akin to what was real. Such an inquiry implied that our time at CFL was somehow inauthentic and unreal. Naturally, one then had to ask what it was that we believed to be authentic. Quite honestly, I didn't care for the answer as the question itself seemed erroneous.

Twelve years at CFL had helped dispel certain anxieties I had carried with me. (Those twelve years of CFL also cultivated in me new anxieties—among other things that I find hard to describe). This school isn't an escape, or a retreat from the "outside" world as is often believed. It is rooted in the real, or what ought to be the real. Strangely enough, one could say the world outside is becoming more and more unreal, almost fictional, designed to breed like-mindedness.

There is a particular kind of fear that is used in educational institutes and other hierarchical systems to homogenise thought and action. At CFL that reality only surfaces as a concept that is then picked apart and examined through dialogue. Any fear within the system is self-cultivated and not instigated by the system. However, one must not misconstrue this and think CFL is some kind of cakewalk. Being a resident of CFL brings with it many challenges, and one should be anxious and fearful (if necessary) about what that entails.

My annual reports often described me as a student with views and behaviours that were antithetical to

the CFL philosophy. My greatest difficulty growing up was that I had no interests back then that could be located within an academic tradition. I liked to climb rocks and trees, wrestle with people, dig holes in the ground and eat fruits, among other even stranger things. It took all of CFL, a year at home and four and a half years of college before I got any closer to finding something that I could see myself working towards. I know of no other institution that could even conceive of granting me that kind of space and time.

I will not be pursuing a career in medicine or working at an assembly line in an automotive industry; I will not be flying you across the Atlantic or attending to your taxes, at least not anytime in the foreseeable future. My position in society is that of a creative practitioner, who by definition is engaging professionally with the uncertain. The truth is that I don't always fully understand what it is that I am supposed to do for you. I am just about beginning to appreciate what it is that I do for myself. Maybe the two are interconnected, maybe that connection is what we all strive for.


CFL afforded me the opportunity to cultivate a crisis of my own, which in turn equipped me to be the teacher and student to my own crisis. The ability to develop one's own agency in this world is something I attribute to school and my family; they worked hand in hand and really hard to aid that process.

There are many things to be fearful and anxious about and one cannot eradicate such components from our life. But crucially there are things one shouldn't have to be afraid of, and learning to differentiate between the two is what school imparted. It's tough work being unafraid—not fearless, not courageous, but unafraid.

I have befriended some brilliant people who have worked their way through more conventional systems. They are what I consider the living embodiment of a miracle. Miracles of this kind are frightfully rare and education shouldn't have to rely on chance, luck and odd circumstances to breed conscious citizens.

CFL is in many ways an experiment with constantly changing variables. In other words, it is unscientific and by that nature, non-replicable. It is marvellous to know that a community like this exists. I hope for the sake of humanity that the values of this system would become an educational standard in time. If not, you will one day have an acrophobic like me flying you across the Atlantic.

**Manush John graduated from CFL in 2009 and graduated from the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology in 2014. He is a co-founder of Every Sheep, an art studio interested in connecting like-minded individuals to collaborate on various projects. He is programme assistant at Taj Residency and SKE Projects. He is working on a public art project for the Bangalore Metro at Peenya.**

 Learning is a complex and continuous process that we all experience throughout our lives. A lot of the learning occurs subtly, through our subconscious, where the mind absorbs things from the surroundings, from the environment through experiences and situations. However, a large portion of our life is spent in being a part of a structured environment that is created for the sole purpose of learning: schools, colleges and universities. Most of our childhood, teenage years and early life is spent being a part of such environments. Over the years I have asked myself the question as to what would be a suitable environment in which any child would feel happy to learn in.

I studied in Centre For Learning from almost the age of four. Way back in our old campus, memories of classes and time spent in school are filled with fun and play. The entire junior section was called the “Vasanthas,” and we were all sprawled across one big room, in which the different age groups had separate classes.

The main subjects we started with were English, mathematics, Kannada and general studies (which covered science, geography etc). To put it in simple terms, learning was always fun, there was excitement to learn new things, eagerness to be in class, ask questions and interact with each other. The structure of an entire day at school was such that there was never the feeling of academics as completely separated from the other activities we engaged in, or that academics overpowered everything else. I remember making mistakes, forgetting things, not turning in work and even losing my books, but not once did I feel like I was ever afraid to be in class, or afraid to learn. The only time I remember experiencing actual, real fear was when the education board government officials had come to visit our school to see if we met the statutory requirements to become a recognised school. One of the officials made me stand up in class and narrate the Kannada syllables. At this point I experienced real fear as firstly, I was clueless as to what exactly I was to do and secondly, because the man himself was fearsome! I still remember that moment.

One of the first things that comes to my mind when I think of school are my teachers. I feel it is so important that, as students, children do not fear their teachers. A lot of anxiety can build up for a child when she is unable to communicate with her teachers or doesn't have the freedom to approach them. At school I was very comfortable with my teachers. During class I never restrained myself from asking questions, doubts, or sharing things. In subjects I found tougher than others, I would repeatedly ask to go over topics or concepts all over again. They were always willing to give time, and were patient enough to look into the needs of all of us individually. Often I would go sit with my subject teachers during study time and go over topics again, or clarify doubts. Having this sort of a space for me was very helpful, as I never felt stressed out while studying difficult topics or chapters. Feeling reassured made me feel less afraid of coping with the work.

Interaction with our teachers was not confined to just during class hours and I feel this made a difference. The relationship was friendlier and there was a lot more affection between teachers and students. Partly this is why I never feared my teachers or felt overly intimidated by them. At the same time I wouldn't say that students shared the same comfort with all the teachers. It varied, and we probably felt more intimidated by some which made us maintain a certain distance from them or stopped us from being completely open with them. I feel that in every institution there will be a varied group of teachers who have different approaches towards handling situations. As human beings we all communicate in different ways and as students we experience a range of emotions coming from our teachers: affection, kindness, partiality or favouritism, sensitivity, being open or rigid, suspicion, trust or mistrust, being judged, continuous picking on a student, respect and care and a whole lot more. Living together as a community brings out complex interactions amongst students, and between teachers and students. This leads to both positive and negative experiences that all students take back with them. It is then left to each student to see how they look at their time spent

in school. I have personally taken it as a valuable experience of being a part of these relationships and learning so much from them without taking the negatives to heart.

The consequences of not turning in homework on time or coming late for class were never severe. Requests were made, reminders were given and most often this was enough to make most of us be punctual on our own without any strict actions taken against us. Personally I was most often on time in submitting work and meeting deadlines. For me a simple request or one reminder from the teacher was enough to get to work. So without being scared of the consequences or fearing what my teacher would say, I felt it important for me to be prompt with my work. I was motivated enough on my own to do things without requiring an external pressure. At times I would become casual, often distracted or playful and naughty in class. Even this was given its space and I know that we were allowed to be this way experiencing it all. I know our teachers understood this, understood us and were careful to observe whether it was just a phase or something that was serious enough to be addressed. It is a part of every student's childhood and I'm so glad that I got to have that freedom.

CFL created an environment for me where I could enjoy my childhood without being pressurised by all the learning academically and otherwise. Sometimes we would go to class and this would happen; “Venku, read us a story, let's not have English class,” “Yasmin aunty can we do a fun experiment today, can we make soap?”, “Srini don't take class today!” “Shash let's play a math game,” “Radish, can we sit on the rock and have class?” And thanks to all of that we had some very fun classes that I will never forget. Listening to *The Hobbit* being read out to us in class was such a lovely experience; going for a walk to the Bermuda triangle during class; making soap and firecrackers in the lab; drinking coffee in an early morning math class: all such memorable experiences. These are just a few examples, trust me; we have literally bullied every single teacher into entertaining all our whims!


Coming back to the topic at hand, what I did fear though, which took a while for me to get rid of, were examinations. The mere thought of having marks and a time limit scared me. Most of my fear was just built up by my own mind and was unnecessary. The idea of having exams only from the tenth standard onwards is a good concept as then the children don't have to go through the stress of writing exams all through their time at school. It gives enough time to learn the basics and build a stronger foundation with concepts that are applied later on. However the entire experience was so new and alien for me that it made me quite nervous. The thought that these were my very first exams ever in my life had its own pressure on me. Therefore I do wonder personally if maybe writing small tests or having mock exams earlier on would have actually made me not fear the thought of writing an exam. During the time I studied my bachelors at St. Josephs College, I got so used to writing tests and exams so often that I actually lost all my fear. It became something I barely felt stressed about anymore. However I cannot compare the approaches used to say which is better than the other; it is not so straightforward. I was quite afraid during our board exams, mainly because I lacked the confidence in myself to do well. Realising that even if I were to do badly it would not be the end of the world helped me feel a lot more relaxed while writing them. I remember every teacher telling us not to over-stress ourselves but to just put in our best and to enjoy the studying. Nevertheless there was disappointment when I did not achieve the top grades.

Examinations in general do bring about a lot of comparison between students. It is therefore important that a student does not get affected by getting an A, B or C in order to carry on without feeling a sense of failure. It is still not clear as to how we could create an environment in which there is learning without a sense of comparison.

Over the years I have got over the fear and now I no longer fear exams or tests of any kind. I feel CFL really provided a beautiful space for me to learn and explore subjects without fear of any kind, not only

in academics but in all aspects. Creative hobbies, nature related projects, reading books, engaging in discussions, doing land work, community work every day: all of this has led to a wholesome learning experience. There are so many aspects of CFL that relate to learning without fear that it is hard for me to explain it all. I certainly had a great time studying there, learning things there, and exploring values, thoughts and experiencing life with amazing teachers. In short, CFL made me approach life in a different way, with an open mind.

**Niveda Manjunath graduated from CFL in 2008. She has a Bachelor's degree from St Joseph's College, Bangalore, and a Master's from Mount Carmel College. She is currently working with Quadragen Vet Health, an animal health company, as a technical executive.**

 I had a first-hand experience of two, very different forms of schooling. Until the second standard I was at a mainstream school, one where you had to wear a uniform every day of the week. The assembly consisted of standing in rows in the playground, singing the school song and the national anthem etc etc... you get the picture. The second one was CFL.

My journey at CFL began when I first visited the school when I was around seven years old. When my father and I drove through the gates, I was wondering where the security guard was, where the big building which contained all the classrooms were, where the designated playground was. I did not understand the campus. There were small thatched huts and other buildings scattered around the land. We walked around for a while. My father spoke to some people and to cut a long story short, I spent the next ten years of my life at CFL.

I remember this moment clearly because it led to a phase in my life which I will forever cherish. I cannot imagine the effect of spending those ten years at a "mainstream" school. Looking back, the main reason for me not enjoying my first school was the constant feeling of being constrained. There was a feeling that doing something wrong would mean being punished or scolded. The feeling was experienced from the minute you came near the school: the towering, lifeless building, the high fence that surrounded the playground and as you approached the big iron gates, the uniformed security guard. This fear continued in the classes through the day until I left the physical boundaries of the school every evening.

CFL, on the other hand, had a big campus outside the city with large open spaces punctuated by clusters of trees. The buildings too were constructed to ensure maximum amount of natural light and ventilation. The library, probably the biggest building on the campus, was open and spacious. The open dining areas were a treat. None of the buildings made you feel constrained. There was just no place for fear or feeling constrained because the idea of education in its entirety was different. The system

of instruction was so open and this reflected in the way the school took shape as well.

These elements helped in self-exploration, something that every student did to varying degrees whether it was during quiet time or on walks through the campus. This freedom, time and space to reflect without constraint is what, looking back now, I cherish the most. I did not have this in any other part of my educational life. There was a space for personal expression and experimentation without the fear of failure or doing something wrong. There was no one right way of doing things. Traditional structures of hierarchy and authority were absent.

Personal creativity was encouraged, so much so that some of the excuses for not doing homework were downright outrageous! Kids who wanted to do art, photography, pottery, study lizards, snakes, butterflies were encouraged to follow their interests. I myself spent a lot of time in the pottery shed. It was a way of disconnecting from the world and focusing on what I enjoyed. In a school that is so open to alternatives, it is no wonder that it has a lasting impact on your life after school. Most students who graduated from CFL have not gone on to do the so-called mainstream degrees or jobs after that. Most of my school-mates have moved into fields that kids from the mainstream school would not go near, for fear of it not being "secure" enough. CFL seems to have created a community of people who are willing to take risks, try new things and look at problems from wildly different perspectives.

Each individual will respond differently to these formative years, but from my experience, learning was a lot more enjoyable when there was freedom. Could this lead to a better society, one which is able to adapt to changing circumstances and is not afraid to try something different? I think so.

**Ananda Siddhartha graduated from CFL in 2007. He is currently working part-time as a teaching assistant at the Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media, where he did a post-graduate diploma.**

*From the diary of a six year old boy at the American school in Tangier Morocco: 'I get up at 8.30. I eat my breakfast. Then I go to the job.'*

*When asked what he meant by the job he said 'School, of course'*

- The Job, William S. Burroughs

Before I joined CFL, I remember being extremely reluctant to forgo an opportunity to become the vice-captain of my “house” in my previous school. It was a big thing for me. There were a few things that defined success in secondary school; this was one of them. My world was filled with certainties. My aspiration was neatly circumscribed by the competitive environment in school and the fear of failing to make a mark, to become “ordinary” in a race of achievers. I did well academically, and my growth was benchmarked against my grades and my success in interschool “extra-curricular” events. I was creative within boundaries, but I was rewarded for sticking to the answers. The world of my school was demarcated in clear black and white compartments, prescribed paths: uniforms, time tables, discipline, punish, exam, first rank, prizes in elocutiondrawingpublicspeakingdebatecompetition... the list was endless. I was comfortable as long as I was more or less walking along the trajectory of the winner archetype. The vice-captaincy would be the next step in that road.

I realised very soon that I must restrict my sense of adventure within some prescribed limits. In my primary years, my teachers marked my calendar because I was “day-dreaming” or “talkative in class.” People who questioned would be taken to the front of the class or be punished for their “deviance.” I remember asking a question about a king of Magadha in history class. I wanted to know a little more about his life than was in the text book, and my teacher, who was usually appreciative of me as I did quite well in my history exams, looked at me as if she could not understand what I was saying. When I asked her again, she gave me a curt but polite stare and informed me to not let my mind stray too far away from what was prescribed. I did really well academically that year as well.

When I joined CFL, for the first few months I remember feeling that everything was upside down. If the old system relied heavily on control and order, CFL seemed to be a space of exploration. My competitive world view took a beating, because the metrics of success had changed. Rather, I was driven to question what success meant at its deepest level.

I was confronted with ideas that would have been blasphemous in the previous environment: being comfortable with uncertainty. Having an inherently questioning mind was here considered intrinsic to learning. Suddenly I came to a place where I did not have to have answers at my fingertips, and where my questions weren't subsumed within some larger intimidating plan of the “schooling project.” It took me a while to get used to this. Learning did not equal academic growth defined in a certain way and kept in place by fear.

Soon, I found things that I loved doing. I became passionately interested in literature, theatre and in music (among other things). I learnt to question and to explore rather than be comfortable with a kind of truth, a convenient answer. I learnt to look into the subtext, the backstory of the formula.

The thing about systems of control—large organisational structures that operate within rules and by the power of surveillance and the idolisation of a certain kind of achiever at the cost of the ridicule and ostracisation of a certain kind of deviant or “questioner”—is that individuals often don't realise when they begin to play by the rules, when they begin to enjoy their boundaries and start to love the rewards enough to forget how the ropes that bind them restrict their movement. They mistake this *nasha* for a conquering of fear. They forget that the boat is only a vehicle within the larger ocean. They don't want to jump because they are taught that the water is deep and that the sharks might kill them. It doesn't matter if you can't really see these sharks; don't fear them though, because the boat will protect you.

I have seen this even in office spaces when the words “think outside the box” are merely thrown around as a new language with which to admire the

strength and formidability of the metal contours, rather than actually to bend and mould them. The weapons can be anything—financial targets, bosses, sign-in/sign-out times, timesheets, practiced reward and punishment—but they all revolve around certainty of a kind, they put the outcome on a pedestal, and diminish the value of the journey.

My experience of learning in CFL, on the other hand, was that the journey is where the joy lies. The removal of fear from the learning context immediately translates to an atmosphere of debate, exchange of ideas and the space for tangential thought. In CFL I cannot remember experiencing fear (as opposed to the kind of fear that cripples growth and creative scope). In the everyday, I saw how the environment of questioning led to a healthy dialogue, and a situation in which curiosity was never muffled. Fear relies on the strict adherence to a value, or a kind of social structure or a hard moral code. Even a little bit of straying from that code invites retribution. CFL had different values, different structures and codes from the kind of education system that I was part of then—so much so that I remember describing the move from one to the other as a “culture shock.” But I believe that what lies at the core of CFL's educational philosophy is not blind and convenient adherence that builds fear, but a spirit of dialogue, and of nurturing curiosity.

CFL taught me to question rigid certainties, by directing me to the insidiousness of such structures; it taught me to be critical. It taught me to smell, to feel the texture, the colour, the flavour of the water I was swimming in, and not just assume that there was only one kind of ocean, or that I was one kind of fish.

**Ajinkya Shenava graduated from CFL in 2006. He currently works as a strategist in a branding agency. In addition he continues to pursue his interest in the arts, as well as independent research in arts education.**


I graduated from Centre For Learning almost ten years ago. To state that the value of education is recognised retrospectively is now a cliché. Yet I cannot help but reiterate this. Yes, I did grow up in a nurturing environment that explicitly challenges the culture of fear. However, if CFL gave me the tools to reject fear as a guiding force, I only slowly learned to wield these tools in meaningful ways. I later learnt how to be reflective without being narcissistic; how to be affected by the world in productive, interesting ways and crucially, how to be honest about vulnerabilities but also somewhat indifferent to them.

What had an irreversible impact was not the abstract educational philosophy, but the quality of the relationships I enjoyed with the adults of the community and the spaces of trust that were called classrooms. While I know that the classroom is not the epicentre of the vision, I want to emphasise how crucial it was for someone like me. Simply put, as a fifteen year-old, I was able to redirect my restless energies because of pedagogic ingenuity. I received refuge from my adolescent churning in the classroom. The transition from being preoccupied with oneself to being concerned by other questions, more compelling questions, is truly liberating. Instead of battling my own demons, I battled with something harder: math and science. Later, my encounter with sociology, psychology and literature cemented a method of engagement with the world that to me was intuitive. The classroom was an interesting, stimulating space only because I never once felt like I was being assessed by my teacher or my classmates. The feeling of being an active agent, of picking at a puzzle, of marvelling at a phenomenon, was precious and it calmed my frenetic teenage mind. At a time when I was ridden with an overwhelming sense of unease, I revelled in those chunks of forty-five minutes defined by non-judgement. I was safe. I was learning. I was fearless.

Growing up is horrible. First, because it often involves crippling periods of self-doubt, fearfulness and heightened self-consciousness. Second, because it is all consuming. Surely adolescence can

be classified as a pathological condition with established symptoms, namely, chronic anxiety, frequent bouts of obsessiveness, myopic vision and sweaty palms. I, just like everyone else, suffered through the painful, drawn out process of growing up. The emphasis on reflection amplified an existing adolescent tendency to be self-absorbed and inward looking and I (like many) got lost in a winding internal labyrinth. As it turns out, CFL cannot rescue one from the fundamental disequilibrium that is inherent to growing up. But later, when I did emerge from the fog, I did possess an enabling clarity. Obviously, I don't claim to know the best way to live. I am simply claiming the clarity and conviction needed to venture into choppy waters and to choose a clear direction without choosing a destination. In the process I came to discover a way of life that simultaneously allows for both defiance and indifference to the seductive pull of currents. In essence, what I am grateful for are the nautical skills that allow me to navigate a mapless world.

**Devika Narayan graduated from CFL in 2006. She is currently doing her PhD in Sociology at the University of Minnesota.**

 As a care-free and loud seven year old, my idea of school was a classroom full of students sitting with their backs slouched on the benches, a blackboard and the ayah chewing tobacco, ensuring that none of us made any mischief. With the bell came the teacher, who would greet us and then begin to teach. I don't remember having too many interactions with the teacher or students asking questions to enhance our understanding of what was being taught. Then, at various points in time, we had tests and at the end of the year, the all-important exams, in which we had to do *well*, not just pass.

I hated Monday mornings. I woke up feeling so miserable that I had to go away from my parents to a place that did not make me feel too happy. (It is important that I differentiate between what one would commonly understand as separation anxiety and how I felt, because this despair started when I was four years old and continued till I was seven!) Very soon I realised that, like me, most of my classmates were as eager for the day to finish, so that we could go back home. This was comforting because I was not the odd one out. In addition, one had to deal with other challenges—punishment, bullies, homework—all of which made schooling a bit heavy and anxiety inducing.

Learning, understanding, clarity: these were words that made very little sense to me at that point in time. All I understood was that every child had to go to school because this would help in finding a job once she was old enough.

Then one day, my parents took me to a house with a sand-pit, a dog, some children and some adults. I watched as the kids and adults went about doing different activities. To my surprise, the adults were referred to as “aunties” and “uncles”. I wondered where I was. Then a lady with a little grey hair asked me if I wanted to read a book or do some colouring. I readily agreed to do the latter. But of course my drawing was nowhere close to what I had in mind and the harsh way in which I judged it was obvious to the aunty. She said something like “Everything does not have to be perfect, does it?” I was

completely taken aback by this response. I just did not know how to react. By then my parents, who had gone into the house and were talking to some of the adults, came out to take me home.


A few months later, my parents told me that I was going to a different school. I was not particularly excited. But on the first day of school, my father took me to the same house again, where I had done colouring and had met that strange aunty. It was only then I realised that the house I had previously visited was a school! I was pleasantly surprised because this was so different from what I understood school to be.

Everything in this place was so different. First of all, the number of students in the entire school was less than the number of students in each section in the old set-up! No uniforms, no sitting on the ground, not so many activities in a day, the list is endless. But what stood out for me was the way in which children were treated by the adults. The teachers were so invested in the holistic development of a child. Therefore, it did not matter when a student was unable to understand math or some other subject, as long as they were putting in their best. Even when a child made mistakes, it was dealt with firmly; but the underlying feelings were love and concern. I remember, soon after I joined CFL, I was so curious about how a stapler works, that I ended up breaking the spring in it. The response of the teacher was something like: “You need not have broken it to understand how it works, but now that the stapler is broken, please buy another one for school.” I was ready to be whacked, like I would have been in my old school. The fact that there was absolutely no fear used to make me understand that what had happened was wrong really hit me. In this way, it took me a little time to adjust to the new school, which taught me that freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. But there was no looking back for me. I loved going to school, despite its share of challenges.

While I did not realise why my parents put me into CFL at that point in time, in retrospect I do. I think as a child, my very definition of school had changed

drastically. I was unable to put my finger on what made going to school so much fun. For a long time, I attributed it to the co-curricular activities like pottery and swimming and to the warmth of the teachers. But I have come to understand that these were just a part of the schooling. The fact that I knew I would not be punished or judged made me feel more secure. And when a child learns something covered in a blanket of security, the quality of learning is very different. The fact that we had no exams did help, but I do think it was secondary. In my understanding, what made CFL truly a centre for learning was that education was not driven by fear or a need to achieve a particular goal. Instead, we were learning so that we have a greater understanding and clarity about the subject, the arts and most importantly, ourselves.

**Lakshmi Viswanatha graduated from CFL in 2002. She is associated with an organisation called Public Health Foundation of India and works in the field of maternal health.**

 In my exploration of education as a way of life, the role of fear has always been a fascinating question for me. It has a grip over the individual, young or old, like nothing else.

Growing up at CFL, an environment where the adults care and are interested in creating a space where the child can flower in goodness, was the foundation in which I found my roots. Here was a group of adults I trusted, a group of adults who mentored me with great affection. This was the home for our growing minds and with us our parents grew and explored life.

Growing up at CFL, a space which was free of all the outward structures that lead to fear—the examinations, competitions, comparisons, reports, moving from grade to grade—gave me a feeling of intense freedom. As children, we could grow up to cherish each day and not be caught in the web of outward structures that defined us and fixed criteria that we had to conform to.

But does the dropping of these superficial structures magically allow for the child in us to grow up without fear?

I found my mind was still caught in seeking security and this sustained fear. This fear was real and the sources of it intangible. This was the fear of not being accepted. It was a constant fear. I felt sure that the fear I held onto was not a deliberate tool used by the adults to make me conform or limit me. They might have been quite unaware that fear was playing out in us in this way. In spite of feeling loved and cared for, the sensation of fear existed. There was the fear that the adults around me were judging me with a yardstick that was not obvious and that I was quite clueless about. The yardstick could be anything really—my diet choice, my tone, if my back was straight or not, how much I read, if I was part of a joint family—just about anything. Any insecurity I had could act as a yardstick.

As I grew in this space, with many culture classes, conversations between teachers, friends and those at home, I came to see clearly that dependence on

anything, on any one, causes and sustains fear. This fear of not being accepted was my own making. The seeking of security through comparison and the constant gratification by others sustained fear.


Through these years my investigation with fear has only grown. The nature of this investigation demands an inquiry that doesn't accept anything, an investigation that is alive. With this exploration one can often have an insight into the nature of many of our psychological states and emotional habits.

Can one ever create a place that is free of fear?

This question has fascinated me over the years. Being aware of fear has opened up interesting insights into the nature of fear. I can see clearly what structures sustain fear and this awareness has its action. One can also see how being in nature, long walks and quietness facilitates the mind that is awake in investigation. Fortunately there is no fear of being on this journey of inquiry into oneself. And even though I have not arrived at any answers or solutions, the adults around me nurtured a mind that would not merely fit into society but pause to look, listen and act.

For me, CFL has always been a space with concern for the growing minds, curious about the nature of human emotions, a place that is interested in bringing about a sane society. These core commitments that drive this place were palpable while growing up here. And this is the ground that has nurtured the spirit of investigation and planted the seed of inquiry in me.

**Tanushree Borundia graduated from CFL in 2002. She discovered her love for being with children while she engaged with the junior school children as a student at CFL. She has been exploring education as a way of life ever since. She has co-founded a small school, Shibumi, where she continues to explore questions about education and life.**

 Staring my school-days nemesis of 500 words to write and a first distant, now looming, now long past deadline in the eye, the irony that my topic is “Learning without fear” isn't entirely lost on me. And in facing that fear, such as it is, contrariety forces me to question the axiom that I learned without fear.

Since it is impossible to prove a negative, the positive examples of fear that existed during my education keep appearing. Removing the fear of expulsion or corporal punishment didn't eliminate all the other fears that are presumably just a part of growing up—the fear of ridicule from my peers, of not meeting expectations, the fear of not fitting in (present, I think, in even as heterogeneous a place as CFL, and possibly made even worse, since a small society doesn't give a misfit too many options), and even the fear of authority, though somewhat attenuated. I don't, of course, count the fear of finding a cobra in the shoe-rack or the fear of falling off a mountain: those are just fond memories and great stories to tell friends.

This is praise, however, even though it is somewhat backhanded. Since I left CFL, I've been lucky enough to meet people who have come from a wide variety of backgrounds—people who have fought their way through the mind-bogglingly immense *gaokao* system in China to make it into the top universities, people who have managed the same feat in the equally (in)famous IIT-JEE, and the remarkably horrifying background of an American inner city public school, where a staggering proportion of students have lost family members in gang violence. The pressures and fears many of them faced in addition to the ones I faced give me perspective on my rather sheltered childhood.


Reflecting on this, my personal insight, which seems so blindingly obvious that it's rather clichéd, is that the fears expanded to fill the space available for them. The more people tried to eliminate causes of fear, the more all-encompassingly frightening relatively trivial things became. Perhaps as a consequence of this, or possibly because I'm more than

usually timid, it took years after “growing up” before some of my personal ghosts stopped haunting me.

The triumph, then, of CFL was not that it eliminated fears, but that it tried to foster an environment where we could talk about them. It may not have succeeded perfectly with me, but at least the seed was planted in my head that these things were open for discussion. And perhaps that's what a place like CFL can do: rather than attempt an ultimately futile elimination of everything that might make a child fearful, to find a way to let them face their fears, and to live with a safety net for a while. Perhaps it is impossible to eliminate a fear of authority, but keeping the consequences of falling foul of authority reversible, as CFL did, is actually a better goal. It seems to have worked for me.

And for all that, looking at current events in my immediate surroundings, there are fears so foreign to me that it seems utterly barbarous that any student should have to deal with them. There were no active shooter drills at CFL, and if I made a clock out of a pencil case, nobody would have called the police. Some fears have no place in schools.

**Nikhil Fernandes graduated from CFL in 2003, got a BA in Physics from Colgate University in 2008, got a PhD in Applied Physics from Cornell University in 2014, and is currently a scientist with the Dow Chemical Company in Philadelphia.**

 Having studied in Krishnamurti schools all my life, I have no direct external experiences against which to compare, but listening to the stories of friends in mainstream schools has made me thankful more than once for the environment in which almost all my academic education took place. I believe there was an entirely sincere and whole-hearted attempt in CFL to bring about an environment in which children were encouraged to learn without fear. There was emphasis on learning together, on exploring together, on enquiring together, and attempts to remove the various pressures that are sadly so much part of most education.

The support that I experienced came in many forms: support to study what I was interested in, to explore those subjects in a manner that was designed for me, and of course the emphasis on enquiring into the nature of fear itself in a shared setting.

However, the teacher can only, it seems to me, remove external fears and pressures—yes, I was not afraid of choosing a non-traditional set of subjects, and was not worrying about what I would do with them after school—but there are much more subtle fears that we all carry in ourselves. Looking back at my school days, truly learning without fear is perhaps more difficult than it seems.

We all bring our own prejudices, our previous experiences and other complications to the table and those bring in their own anxieties. This fear manifests itself in academic subjects as well as dialogue, and looking back at my own schooling the fear was primarily various versions of “What will people think of me?” What if I got a problem wrong; mispronounced a word; said something that was perceived as foolish? All these were a constant and, no matter what the teacher did, these underlay my interactions with them, and more importantly, with fellow students.

I think as adults it's sometimes easy to forget the enormous weight that the opinion of our peers has on us during childhood and adolescence. The teachers might be trying their utmost to engage with the students to bring about an atmosphere of learning

without fear, but that is entirely drowned by the need to avoid seeming foolish in front of one's fellow students. Even in a small class—perhaps particularly there, as there is no way of blending into the crowd and vanishing—this was a very real part of my schooling, and while I realise that it was almost entirely self-inflicted, the pressure of it could not be ignored or set aside. Foolish? Undoubtedly, but how does one see and remove this in a child?

All this was brought home to me with a sharply different perspective when I was teaching mathematics myself, at Brockwood Park School, between 2004 and 2006. Not having had any formal training in pedagogy might have made me clumsy, but I tried to recreate, to the best of my ability, the open atmosphere of enquiry in which I had learnt. I thought I was doing quite well with this, but then I learned a few weeks later that one student felt so much pressure at being asked to talk the class through a problem that she was reduced to tears after the lesson. I had no idea, and certainly didn't see any evidence of this in the class, or indeed in later classes with this student. Only a chance conversation with another staff member revealed this very different result to the one I was aiming for. Students can be very adept at keeping these fears hidden, regardless of how much teachers speak to them and encourage them to share and discuss their feelings.


I think there is also, no matter how much we might say it is not so, an inescapable element of authority that creeps into teaching. This is perhaps only based on experience and knowledge of the subject matter, rather than dogmatic assertion of power, but it's there. I might be telling the class that we are exploring Pythagoras' Theorem together, but I know where we are headed. “A squared plus B squared is equal to C squared” always looms large on the horizon. We are never going to come up with a genuinely new result in this area, and I will have to nudge students towards something that I already know. The students sense this—how could they not?—and this colours our interaction. This implicit authority brings about its own reservations on the part of the student to explore on her own, for what is

the point of exploring boldly and fearlessly if we are just going to have to fall into and follow a known rut in the end?

The responsibility of creating an atmosphere of learning without fear is undoubtedly primarily that of the teacher, but it cannot be solely placed there. The student must be willing to engage without reservation, to have confidence in the sincerity of the teacher in trying to create this atmosphere, and that is of course impossible without trust. I do not know in what way this trust can be created, other than repeated demonstrations that we are indeed learning together, that the teacher can make mistakes and be pulled up on them, that blind alleys are an integral part of exploration, not something to be avoided and to be apprehensive about. It seems to me that all teachers can do is demonstrate this sincerity, constantly remind themselves not to even unconsciously assert authority, and then invite the student to meet them halfway.

Was my education free of fear? Absolutely not, largely because I invented and indeed carefully nurtured my own fears. However, looking back, I am grateful for the enormous effort that my teachers took, because perhaps the idea of learning without fear took time to mature in me, and this is something that many years later I can appreciate the tremendous value of. Perhaps learning without fear, like so many things, is also something that must be learnt and appreciated slowly, rather than necessarily being completed within a fixed timetable before one leaves school.

**Anuruddha Jaithirtha graduated from CFL in 1999. He is currently working for an IT consultancy company in the UK, based in London.**

 When I was asked to write an article on being educated in an environment that investigated learning without fear, I felt I needed to sort out my thoughts. Was I scared of learning or of anything else, while in Centre For Learning? What role did the school have to play? How was the fear I felt different from what students in other schools would feel?

I tried to identify the types of fear that students face in school in general, and the parts of the school system that create this fear: physical hurt (through corporal punishment and bullying); public shaming (such as making students stand in a corner or reproaching them in front of the entire school); failure (answering incorrectly in class, scoring low on assignments and exams, being compared unfavourably with peers); teacher authority and power (making students overtly display respect of and grant authority to teachers, discouraging questioning or contradicting teachers); social non-acceptance (not belonging to the peer or larger group, not having friends).

To me, did studying in CFL mean freedom from these types of fears? Was it clear that CFL was investigating learning without fear? How did this investigation affect me—both in terms of the actual learning experience, and the awareness that such fear was being discussed at all? It's been a good many years, so I don't know how accurate or complete my memories are.

Neither I nor my parents even considered the possibility of being physically harmed in CFL, nor luckily in any other school I attended. Though my parents worried about the safety of some CFL excursions, I don't remember anything serious happening (even though we did encounter earthquakes and falling in rivers). For me, the non-existence of physical hurt is, or should be, table stakes in education.

The other types of fear are more complex to assess. CFL has always been clear about its attempt to minimise the hierarchy between students and teachers. Older students would address younger teachers by their first names, adding “aunty” or “uncle” while



addressing older teachers. There was no physical division of students and teachers (no separate seating or toilets), and manual tasks such as cleaning were divided. We were also encouraged to question teachers about everything—from study-related questions to whether CFL actually embodies the values the teachers spoke about. Still, there was a distinct division between teachers and students (though maybe that is necessary within an educational environment)—but a sense of division is different from fear.

Another much discussed issue was the fear of failure: what does failure mean? Is it okay to not be good at something to survive in the “outside world”? How does the fear of failure affect learning? There was always an unspoken assumption that CFL was a safe environment in which you need not be good at academics or other activities—with the corresponding assumption that *some* area will be your strength—but it seemed obvious to me that the larger world was not so forgiving, and failure meant starvation or oblivion. Knowing that we had to grow up and enter this outside world couldn’t completely dispel the fear of failure while in school.


Adding to this fear was the sense of inadequacy that comes with comparing oneself to a peer. Where I currently work, the performance appraisal system has been changed from force-fitting employees along a bell curve to focusing on individuals’ performance along with their areas of strength and developmental needs—yet employees still want to know where they rank at their level. Despite CFL deliberately avoiding competition and comparison, we still compared ourselves with each other—though we didn’t acknowledge or openly say that we were doing it.

A more subtle fear was of not being liked, not fitting in, or of being publicly humiliated. I don’t remember this being discussed a lot, but maybe it was and my memories have dimmed. Unlike many other schools where public humiliation is considered a form of punishment and reform, CFL teachers (for the most part) didn’t scold or reproach in a school-wide forum.

Yet, as with many institutions, CFL has its own culture. When I attended CFL’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, a classmate said, “You can always tell who CFL students are, with their shaggy haircuts and kurtas for special events.” While in school, I remember another friend saying, “If you don’t embrace trees and frogs and nature, you’re judged as being uncool or not having the right attitude.” Because culture itself is a slippery concept, it is difficult to say how much of it was determined by teachers, and how much by students (and their adolescent emotions). My experience was that not fitting into this culture was a real, if again unvoiced, fear.

Often the same cycle would occur: we would discuss how fear affects thought or action; I would realize that I feared something, but maybe not acknowledge it even to myself, let alone a teacher or friend; and I would feel vaguely guilty that I felt such fear at all. It comes back to the same question that has been discussed for years in Krishnamurti schools: is it possible to live (and learn) without fear? While I am no closer to an answer, purely based on my own experience, I would have to say “no”—the majority of my education was relatively fearless though not completely without fear.

**Aditi Rao graduated from CFL in 1999. She is currently working as an editor at Deloitte University Press, where she edits thought leadership and helps business analysts improve their writing.**


 I started at CFL in the eighth standard, having attended a more conventional school earlier which followed the state curriculum. By experiencing two types of secondary schooling, I think I benefitted from both, and I share my thoughts about “fear and education” from this perspective.

I benefitted from my conventional school approach without always being fearful of it. This school emphasised structure and discipline by following text books according to a set curriculum and administering exams regularly. Such an approach required a certain rigour from my learning. I had to be disciplined to prepare for exams. I was motivated to do my best for myself, for my parents (who have a strong interest in my education), and to prove to my teachers and peers that I was capable. When I was not adequately prepared I felt fearful of failing to prove myself. But when I was prepared I felt confident that I could excel. I therefore felt that fear was not integral to the structured and disciplined approach in this school, but could easily arise without the right support system from teachers, parents and peers.

At CFL, I will admit when I first started that the curriculum seemed less structured and I was surprised by the lack of regular exams. However, in place of discipline, I felt welcomed to express myself—thoughts, fears, academic enquiry, and imagination. I was motivated through a remarkably open approach at education which gave me the space and freedom for both expression and discovery. There was space for both individual and collective enquiry; many of my interests in nature, theatre, fine arts, and the natural sciences were discovered and shared openly with my peers, not only of my age but juniors and seniors as well. There was no fear of failing. Such openness and freedom of enquiry allowed me to always express myself and experiment with various interests, with a strong support system of teachers, peers and parents.

Education without fear imparted in me a self-confidence I carry with me to this day. For this I am courageous and grateful.

**Deviah Aiama graduated from CFL in 1998. He is a programme manager at IUCN, Geneva and manages projects with businesses seeking to better understand their biodiversity risks, impacts and mitigation options in a range of sectors including agriculture, aluminium and forestry. He has a Master’s degree in environmental studies and a Bachelor of science degree in environmental biology, both from Queen’s University, Canada.**

 Right from when I was quite young, I seemed to be gripped by fear. It created nervousness, a trembling, a terrifying feeling, a sense of “I don’t know” or “I don’t want to do this.” I was no more myself at that point. I remember how I would feel if I were asked to sing for someone... the fear would grip me, palms and feet would sweat, I wouldn’t know what to sing, I would go blank and the heart rate would increase phenomenally. I would somehow get through the singing and just cringe. It was the same with talking in public, speaking out my opinion, creating a product that could be judged in any way. Some of these fears I learned to cope with. But I realised that even in my twenties I had them and they were as real as always. Life was painful having to go through the fear and the humiliation that came along with it.

When I look back at school times, and ask what I was feeling when I felt I was afraid, the strongest feeling is that of being judged. I didn’t want to be wrong. I didn’t want people to think I was wrong, and as a result I stopped going towards anything I could go wrong in. That way I wouldn’t land in

a situation where I was judged! I was never ready to take up challenges where I was not sure of the outcome. Over time, I had found ways to hide the fear. Some of it may have been evident but my sense is that most of it was well camouflaged. In fact the camouflage worked in the strangest of ways! I portrayed an image that I wanted the others to see: confident and bold! Most people thought I was confident and bold.

I think I managed to keep my school and the teachers mostly in the dark about my limitations. They did not realise this. There was a point when a teacher's encouragement and appreciation meant nothing to me, because I had decided that I was not good enough and that the teacher was only trying to encourage me and not speaking the "real" truth. The few challenges that I could have faced I managed to fudge. I was very good at certain areas like games, art and outdoor activities, and I always chose these areas rather than facing anything new. This behaviour became my second nature, giving me a false sense of confidence. None of this was known to me then. Not with this clarity. It has taken me years to recognise these movements; I have got over some of them while in other aspects I am still a work in progress.

All children are brought up with "Very good, you are a good girl, oh how nice," and so on. This is delivered to us as children either subtly or directly. The idea passed on is: be good, be excellent and then you would have made it in life. The ones who pick this thread up are stuck with it for a long, long time. Today I am able to see this to some extent and so say what I am saying with clarity, but I am as stuck. Now I have to consciously drop having to please the other as the pattern is so ingrained in me, and the base of this pattern is fear!

In school environments, students do as they are expected. This expectation is at the subtle level. It is: "do as I say", "please me", "think as I think." As a result most of the children become obedient, right or good. Once this pattern is established it is hard to break it as it is directly connected to being accepted.

So the student uses all methods possible, to project an image, by doing the right thing, behaving the right way and being obedient to cover up her fear.

I think it would help if the adult is transparent about his own self with the student, with respect to his own fears and inadequacies. This would help the student see that the adult also has fears, feels inadequate and that he is not a superman who has accomplished his goals fearlessly and effortlessly.

The teacher has to be present to each and every child. He has to drop his bias about "a good child" or "a right child" and see where the child is stuck. If the teacher cannot see this, the child will fool him. The teacher would have to accept this child the way he is and help him identify his fears and inadequacies.

Once some of the fears and inadequacies are identified, they need to be tested or checked to see if these statements of fear are really true. Most of my inadequacies were not true factually; however it took me a long time to see this and accept it. Testing these statements will lead us closer and closer to the source of the actual fear. Most of the statements we have are assumptions.


When the real fear is exposed, the teacher needs to help the student see that the fear can be faced and overcome, and that it is not as difficult as it seems. The teacher and the student together can set up goals and the teacher can help the student accomplish them. When the issue is such that goals cannot be set up, we can help him identify the experience he must go through and hand-hold him and push him if necessary. This push is most essential because although the student wants to take up the challenge, his own fear blocks him. After going through this tough experience, the student's confidence and self-respect will increase and his respect for the teacher too will increase.

This process teaches the student to accept himself, identify his inadequacies, and get over them or accept them. This is a skill the person can use for the rest of his life. This process requires an absolute loving and a trusting relationship between the

teacher and the student. The teacher has to be open, unassuming and unbiased. If not, it will become yet another method that might work only for some students.

Acceptance has been the main key that helped me get over many of my fears. The moment I stopped denying my fears and just recognised them, I could grow with the help of others. This journey has been arduous, but today I am in a space where I am aware of my fears and am consciously working on it and so my journey goes on.

**Nandini Ram Mohan graduated from CFL in 1995. She is currently head of Magic Puddles, a kindergarten in Bangalore.**

 The theme is fear—but I'd like to talk about shame.

When I look back on my school education I don't recall much fear, really. Even thirty years ago, fear and punishment were seen as Victorian hangovers utilised by unskilled teachers. So, thinking back, fear was not a problem for me. Nor do I really think fear was a driving impulse for any of my friends.

But I do recall shame in my education. A lot. And just as much from my teachers as my peers. When I was younger, there was the shame of failure in your peer's eyes. For example, being chosen last for the football game as people sniggered at you and rolled their eyes (decades later, while reading Kazuo Ishiguro's "Never let me go," I came across a similar scene that instantly transported me back all those years). Then, as you became older, the shame surrounding sexuality—not knowing what was happening to you and not being able to articulate hot and messy feelings. And finally, most troublingly in retrospect, shame at not being "serious enough" as a

young adult. Finding that one had to secretly enjoy the wrong sort of music, or the wrong sort of novel. And such shaming was contagious; if the adults set the norms, there was no question that they would most savagely be enforced by your peers. I can still feel the mind-numbing panic of feeling like there was something wrong with me, that I was bound to fail the people whom I admired.

I was in an enlightened school, and we discussed fear and we discussed anger, and we discussed relationship, and we discussed alienation, but I am struck in retrospect by how little we discussed shame. Years later I know that it is a social emotion, and that it may be an inevitable part of socialisation, but during my education I don't recall teachers or students being sensitive about this. Worse, I think it was actually a semi-conscious tool of power in student-teacher relationships. No one would really try to scare or bully me. But I do think that we were shamed reasonably often. Think even of the words "fearless" and "shameless". Only one of them is seen in a positive light.

This is not recrimination here. It's more a question of trying to figure out why it is that we do not name this, work through it and recognise it for what it is. How can educators and adults help children grow up, become socialised, but do so without imparting shame? It is a subtle thing and a strange emotion because it is so much a part of relationship and growing up, and yet it can be so constitutively destructive. It is relatively easier, I think, to relate to a child without inculcating fear. But the influence one has on children, especially in their painful generation of a self in their teenage years, is a vital and delicate influence and can be seriously abused without even noticing it.

Perhaps it was just me and I have an acute sensitivity to being socially outcast, but I don't think so. The more I read about it, the clearer it becomes that dealing with shame is a task that takes people years to do. Why not try and undo it before it starts? One could learn to talk about it as acutely and effectively as one talks about fear. Nor is there no larger

experience with this: in the west, after all, whole generations of psychoanalysts have been dealing with hidden shame! Our education is not powerless to address this. My very fleeting impression also is that there is possibly less shaming going on for the current generation of students. They appear far more relaxed, which is testament, I suppose, to the less judgmental approach than was adopted earlier. Perhaps one deals with shame in the same way that one deals with most things well in a human community: by being more sensitive and kind to it and the gamut of the human experience.

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Whenever someone asks me what it was like being a student at Centre For Learning (CFL) in its early days, I find myself unsure of what to say. Describing CFL is never easy, perhaps because there isn't enough of a common context within which a reasonable understanding of my school experience can be communicated. I could say it was somewhere between a school and a family. Of course, that means it included all of the closeness and affection, as well as the expectations and misunderstandings, of both school and family. As parents we are always our child's first teacher in the world, and having *school* arise out of *family* seems a very natural progression.

What I remember primarily was the sense of being on equal footing with the teachers in the classroom at CFL. In particular, I cannot remember fear being used by any of my teachers as a way to get us to learn, or to motivate us, or to punish us for any reason. Fear of my teachers did not shape or frame my interactions with them, or what we were learning, or the dynamic of the classroom. This was liberating

in the sense that these fears did not form barriers to my learning, or to my sense of exploration of what I was learning academically.

Yet of course I was not free of fear. I mean the more pernicious kinds of fears, the ones that seem almost natural, which are perhaps learnt or instinctive from a younger age. I suppose I mean fears of a social kind: of what other people thought of you, not being *good enough*, being a failure, being isolated or ridiculed or ostracised. Then there are also the fears that arise when the community or family you are in is small enough not to be able to hide from your actions.

For example, I recall fear of my being unable to live up to what I thought other people expected of me, and in particular, my abilities in mathematics. These fears of failure or of expectations are more complex, and perhaps they are being created by my own sense of self. That is, they appear tied quite deeply to the picture I make of who I am, or to the story of myself that I generate. I'm not sure how a community, or a school, could possibly create an environment free of these far more subtle fears. But in my experience CFL has always embraced these fundamental and difficult questions and I've never seen a community as committed to this exploration.

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