

CFL Newsletter

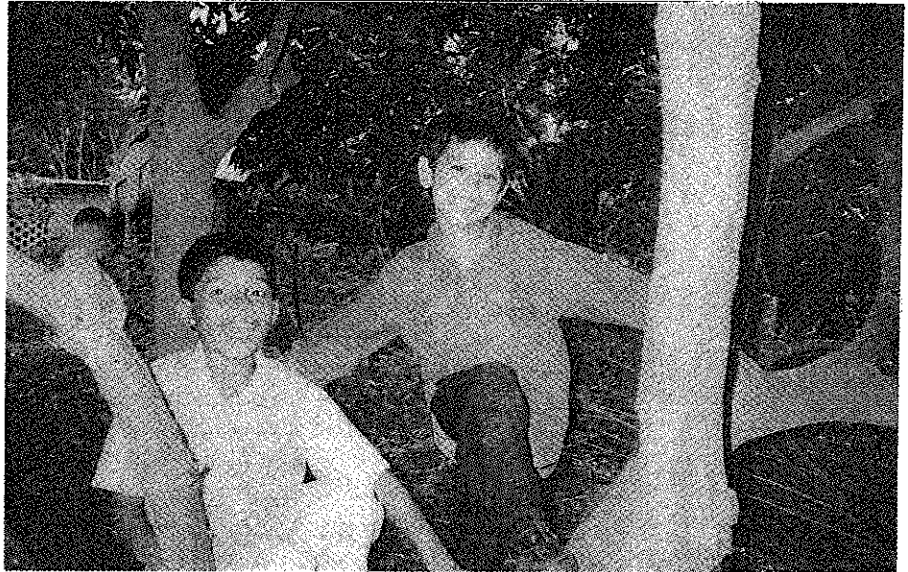
Issue 5

Winter '98-'99

They've changed the face of CFL this year - eight new children in the youngest group - and there isn't a heart they haven't wormed their way into since they arrived. They spend their time in school swinging from the ropes, raiding the trees for cherries, ignoring summons, demanding stories, dissolving dignified assemblies into fits of giggles...and end the day, without exception, slumped over their bags, angelically asleep on someone's lap in the van.

Speaking of new beginnings, on August 1st (CFL's eighth birthday), we all went to Varadenahalli to plant trees on the new campus. So far, we have planted over 200 tree saplings there - neem, jacaranda, sisam, teak, tamarind, jackfruit, guava, chikoo and others. There was a ceremonial planting of a peepul tree outside the library-to-be. Soon after this, and for over two months, Varadenahalli has been blessed with more rain than any year in the past two decades, and the saplings are flourishing!

So, we hope, will the children.



Evolving an admissions procedure

For a school like CFL, a healthy and open relationship between the teachers and the parents is crucial; the school benefits the child most when this relationship is strong. So it has always been important to us to communicate clearly to prospective parents what our intentions are, and what CFL is all about. People variously believe that we are a non formal innovative school with plenty of 'extracurricular' activities; or a school where children will not be punished and given too much homework; or a school where a certain philosophy is 'inculcated' and values 'taught'; or a school with a great teacher:student ratio! Perhaps, like all groups, we just don't like to be typecast, but we do believe that our fundamental concern is something deeper - to discover what it means to live intelligently and sensitively, by being awake to the patterns of conditioning in our behaviour. This concern stems from our own daily interactions, rather than being an abstract philosophical idea.

Few schools would place this at the heart of their very existence. We find that to many parents, the intentions of CFL as we express them sound new and unfamiliar. For this, and the added reason that the time of seeking school admission is an anxious one for most parents, we have evolved an admission procedure that is leisurely and interactive. Interested parents visit the school in session, as frequently and for as long as they like. During this time, as many teachers as possible interact with them. In January, we hold a two-day extended meeting with all prospective parents together. The teachers describe the intent and functioning of CFL at depth, and the parents raise their questions and concerns in an open and frank atmosphere. We should mention here that fees are not discussed until after a child is admitted - and that the amount depends on what the parents can afford to pay.

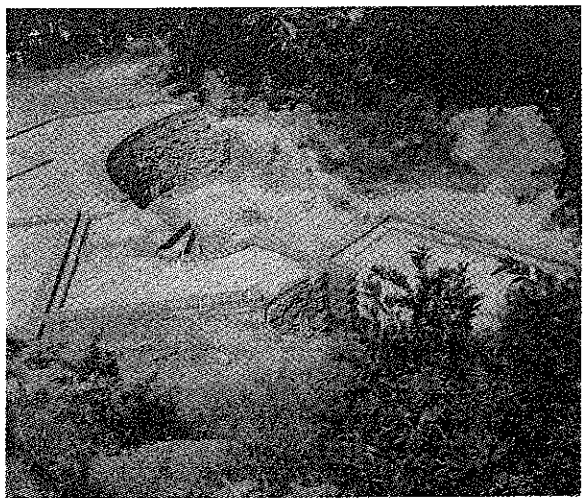
What we look for in prospective parents is, quite simply, an openness and willingness to work with us in the care of their children. And perhaps as important, a clear understanding of what CFL is not!



An update on the new campus

All this year, our architects have been working with us to finalise drawings for seven major structures, slated to

Junior School

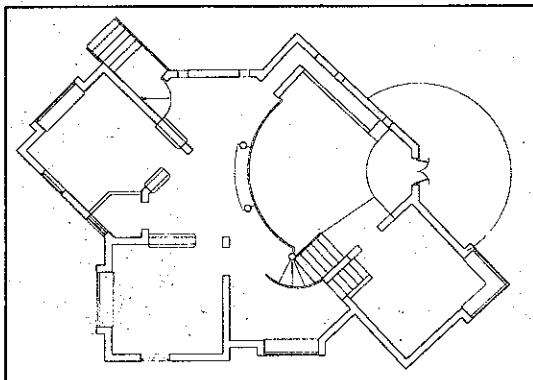


come up in the first phase of construction - junior school, kitchen/dining, library, laboratories, and three residential units (for teachers and students). The structures were traced out on the land itself, so that we could 'walk' through them and get an idea of the spaces. We are fortunate to have a progressive, creative group of architects to work with - who listen and respond to our many requests and suggestions. Construction work began in mid-July, on three structures: kitchen/dining complex, junior school and one hostel. Mr. Sreedhar and his group are helping us with the management of construction at site. The walls are coming up, and fast! The money to pay for all this is coming in slowly but steadily, from friends and organisations both in India and abroad.

Along with designing facilities, we have been learning about sustainable natural resource management, and the ways in which we can care for and regenerate the land. In this we have had the help and advice of a Bangalore-based environmentalist. The design of a rainwater harvesting system has been worked out in all buildings on the campus. Roof water will be collected through a system of drains and pipes, a filtration

unit, and then to an underground cistern. Gray water will be recycled for secondary purposes like gardening and organic wastes will be composted.

We have begun by building bunds, farm ponds, gully plugs, planting trees and nitrogen fixing legumes. As a part of the process, we hope to share the information and expertise gained with others in the village community, and elsewhere, as our implementation of the recommended techniques will be a crucial experi-



ment to evaluate their efficacy.

Fund Raising Effort

As mentioned in earlier newsletters, we were able to buy the land at Varadenahalli with the help of donations from various sources. Early this year, we made estimates for the cost of building construction, equipment, land work and a vehicle. These estimates formed the target for a fund raising campaign that we have been working on since May 1998.

Fortunately, thanks to a combination of generous donors, good investments, and a fair amount of penny pinching over the past several years, we have started our drive with a balance of Rs. 15 lakhs to our credit. Since June '98, we have managed to raise an additional Rs. 12 lakhs. Thus construction work has been going on, but we will need to

raise an additional Rs. 22 lakhs by March 1999 to maintain the pace of construction. The idea is to move in and start functioning with the minimum required infrastructure.

Donations have been and can be of two kinds: relatively large amounts from a few trusts or corporations, and smaller amounts from many friends and supporters of CFL. We value the latter as much, as it is a sign of appreciation and encouragement, apart from having been a serious source of financial support over the past eight years.

Many of you who receive the newsletter have given generous donations to CFL - for these we are very grateful. If you know of anyone who may be interested in supporting our 'new campus' venture, we do hope you will help us contact them.

Curriculum development

A group of us has been working this year on developing a coherent and connected approach to teaching Indian History for the 11 to 15 year olds. Three periods of Indian history were selected and are being taught to three different age groups. For the Paleolithic to early Mauryan kingdoms, the emphasis has been on connecting history with the present wherever possible. Worksheets, reading material and activities have been developed along the way. For example, the students recreated clay artefacts from Lothal. For the middle period, post Mauryan to the coming of the Turks and Afghans, classes have focussed on social groupings, occupations, trade, cultural influences and religion. Here the class is drawing from sources as varied as historical maps, Bharath ki Chhaap (a film), folk tales, journal and magazine articles and secondary historical texts. The emphasis for the third period, the coming of the Europeans to modern India, has been to present an impartial view of events, moving away from nationalistic accounts of the freedom struggle, for example. Films and fiction have proved interesting sources for this period.

Non-intellectual pursuits...

In the spring term of 1998, during the morning assemblies, we listened to a series on Western classical music

appreciation. We also heard parts of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, and rounded off the experience by taking the whole school to a performance by a group from the Grand Moscow Classical Ballet.

Later that term, two groups of students took up the production of the annual school magazine, this time with the theme f-o-o-d! Collecting recipes, trying them out, maintaining a magazine display board and of course twisting arms for articles kept them busy for several weeks. The magazine ('Potluck') was beautifully brought out and, in most homes, occupies a place in the shelf of cookbooks.

Have you ever been wished a 'good nonday'? If you were at CFL on a particular day last March, you might have had a great nonday! The teachers had earlier decided that one of us would choose a day, any day that term, and



when everyone comes to school declare it a 'nonday'. It was a nice surprise, finding ourselves completely and unexpectedly 'free'. We decided together, students and teachers, to spend the day playing games, chatting, taking walks, but especially doing nothings....

At the end of that term, we held our cultural programme. The items ranged from orchestral performances by our youngest (playing on soda bottles, rubberbands and aluminum tins) to dramatisations of poetry from Eliot, Betjeman, Plath and others by the older students and teachers.

During the summer holidays, our architects and the land expert held a workshop for the middle school students. The students were introduced to the concept of water harvesting, built a few bunds and gully plugs and made compost pits on the new campus. We spent two nights and a few days there, and drenched ourselves in the first major thundershower of the year at Varadenahalli - hail and all! The architects exposed the students to ideas of space utilisation and designing living and work areas.

From the start of the new year, all the children have been working on toy making. The middle school worked with bamboo, became familiar with the material, learned how to cut-whittle-bend-sand-etch using various tools. With some guidance, they developed ideas for mobiles, abacuses, bows-and-arrows, rattles and other toys. The junior school, meanwhile, made the simplest and most enjoyable of toys using paper, rubberbands, string, buttons and bottle caps. In September we held a Toy Mela (*Ramat Gamat*) in school celebrating four months of hard work, and centuries of play!

As this newsletter is being written, we are enjoying the visit of Gerard Bayle, a professional actor in the Ionesco theatre in Paris, and currently teacher at Brockwood Park. He is directing the whole school in a year end production - a nativity play, a mimed story of Michelangelo, and 'living pictures' from the life of Christ.

Comings and Goings

In July, we held a 'graduation ceremony' for several of our senior students. It was also a farewell for the first batch of Post School students, who have moved on to further study or full time work. The ceremony was a combination of poetry reading, little skits, gift giving and cake eating. Four new students have since joined the Post School programme, with interests in textile design, economics, pottery,



mathematics, geography and English literature.

The three post schoolers from last year travelled and worked in Europe for eight months. Thanks again to Maryan and other CFL friends, they visited Brockwood Park and went through a three-month rigorous land course in Yewfield, in the Lake District of England. York and Nikhil then cooked their way through Holland, while Sandy spent several months in the Swiss Alps, herding cows and learning how to make Alp Käse, a traditional Swiss cheese.

Kirby, who came to visit last January from Canada, decided to stay on for two years. She's been a willing guinea pig for our experimental teacher exposure course, and we secretly hope she'll stay forever. We're also fortunate to have Danilo Fontana from Switzerland visiting and working with us till next April. He and his mosquito bites are a familiar and lovable sight around school! Sunita, who spent the last year in the U.S., returned to CFL in November. Claire Bernardo, from France, has come to explore relationships among parents, teachers and students; she and her son Ken will stay till the middle of next year. And we said goodbye to 14 year old Tara, whose family is leaving Bangalore.



Retreat

This year, the teachers spent three days at the end of October in a quiet retreat centre outside Bangalore. These are some of the questions we went into together.

We see that the challenge of working so closely together, without the buffers of divided responsibility and hierarchy, can lead to conflicts in relating on a day to day business. No group of people working together is immune to this! We explored the root of these conflicts, and found that one source is the interaction between habitual patterns of behaviour and the fixed images we build about each other. Occasionally the source is a real or imagined deep difference between us. We decided to state in words, frankly, what we suspected were these differences. The beautiful discovery made was that when openly stated, differences were no longer a burden to us.

Sitting there together, on cushions strewn about higgledy-piggledy, feet in the sun and cups of tea in hand, we turned to the question, how much is one responsible for another's state of mind? As educators, what does it mean to be in touch with a child? When we respond to a young person in a way which neither amplifies nor distorts his or her state of mind, then we can be a 'mirror' for that person. Perhaps only such an interaction can bring about an understanding of one's state of mind. But being a mirror is an extraordinary challenge for the teacher, it means being present, being attentive, being free of a sense of self...

Donor Information

CFL is a registered charitable society. Cheques made out to Centre For Learning should be mailed (with a covering note) to

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VSEI (Volunteers in Service to Education in India), a non-profit tax-exempt organisation in the U.S., has taken CFL on as a special project. Donations must be made out to VSEI, specially earmarked for CFL (with a covering note) and mailed to

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- Pg.1: sketch of sapling; photo of two of the youngest students.
- Pg. 2: photo of Junior School at a stage of construction; plan of Junior School by architects.
- Pg. 3: photo from Toy Mela; photo of Sandy milking a Swiss cow; sketch of Indian buffalo by Post School student.
- Pg. 4: bamboo sketch by a student.