



Take Me to Your Leader

At the end of each academic year, in the heat of the summer, the teachers meet to discuss various issues to do with the running of the school. Many of these topics are quite specific, concerned with academic curricula or the division of responsibilities for the coming year. But often, one of us will raise a different, more fundamental kind of question. Then we lean back and settle in for a comfortable four-hour discussion.

This April, we opened our meetings with the question: “What does it mean to be a teacher-run school?” You might be forgiven for thinking that, after twenty years, we should not have to ask this question at all! Actually, we find that it takes constant reflection and hard work to keep this aspect of our working relationships going.

We all have platitudes to describe a non-hierarchical structure. “Everyone has an equal voice.” “We are all equally responsible.” “There is collective ownership.” However, behind these innocuous sentiments, there is a wealth of contradictions, assumptions and, often, muddle headed thinking! Further, on the

ground, none of these admirable principles is easily attained, as our emotions, reactions and anxieties conspire to muddy our own intent. Accordingly, in our discussion, we tried to be unsparsingly self-critical in order to see our challenges realistically. We would like to share some strands of our thinking with you.

For many of us, the central meaning of being “teacher run” is that there is no sense of “they,” a group outside and above us that imposes decisions on the teacher body. This body is the one that enables actions, that has to think through problems and come up with intelligent responses. However, we cannot just assume that this state will automatically sustain itself: there is plenty of scope for a “them” to emerge, a perceived subgroup on which some will comfortably lean and of which others will feel resentful. Some of us have experienced this kind of authority in other settings as leading to a sense of frustration and a lack of accountability.

Coming into this group, a new teacher will inevitably hear some voices louder and longer than others! He could fall into a groove of giving some individuals much greater weight



and jump to the conclusion that “some people make all the decisions around here”. With time, however, it emerges that there is nothing in the system that validates some voices over others. What seems to be of value here is that hierarchy is neither legitimized nor sustained, though this fact may be obscured by the emotions of the moment and impulsive actions. The bottom line is that any individual can turn a decision around, and dominant personalities are as liable to be challenged as anyone else. Learning to use this space we have jointly created is a skill in itself, both for new and old teachers.

A question that often comes up is whether a sense of ownership for CFL comes immediately, or takes time to develop. Sometimes, a new teacher prefers to observe and learn quietly, respecting the accumulated experience of the others, before gradually volunteering opinions and ideas. Others don't seem to hesitate! They plunge in right away, and in such situations the group seems to give ownership readily. Either way, decision making in our meetings is a fascinating process:

by turns fraught, lucid, stormy, smooth. It requires every single individual's strong involvement, a willingness to stick your neck out and take collective responsibility for the decision.

Given that CFL is currently in a generational transition, one thought is deeply felt: how can I take ownership for a place where everything is more or less in place? Where things are the way they are because over the years teachers have tested many ideas and experimented with structures and processes, weeding out the impractical and inessential? This is the double-edged sword of experience. Teachers who have been around for anything from two to twenty years can make statements that are intrinsically open and fresh, or that carry the weight of the past. How not to become static and rigid, while at the same time cognizant of past learning, is a constant challenge. However, this is really only a problem of “structures and processes”; no one at CFL, old or new, has settled the fundamental inner questions of life and living once and for all. In this sense, ownership of CFL is not a knotty matter!

We have been lucky at CFL that the distribution of knowledge and skill among the fifteen to twenty adults has been fairly uneven. Imagine if we'd had to run the school with fifteen English teachers or fifteen finance wizards! We complement and are dependent on each other, but as a result several systems seem to be on “auto-pilot” for those not immediately involved. Is this way of functioning alright for a teacher-run school? Is there a way for each of us to think about and be involved in every aspect of the school? After all, every decision impacts the whole school, given that we are so small.

While we may not have proficiency in all domains to carry out tasks, we can certainly learn and become closely acquainted with the thinking behind different areas: financial and legal issues, campus management or pastoral care, just to give a few examples. The idea is not that we all become completely interchangeable when it comes to running the school, but rather that we are knowledgeable enough to support each other in decision making.



Several hours into the discussion, it is obvious to us that relationship is key to being a teacher-run school. The sense of contact is real; the questions around relating and giving feedback are vital to us all. In this pursuit, all conventional lines—between new and old, youth and age, work and home, my way and your way—are blurred.

So: what does it mean to be a teacher-run school? In the abstract, the question appears impossible, but in our daily work, it seems we know enough to proceed!

Through the Year

We choose four activities to share with you that have gone on through the year: student cooking, dance, photography and Open Mike Assemblies.

Making a meal for a hundred people can be exciting and frightening at the same time. It's a great risk taking activity, and therefore well suited for groups of CFL children to take on. Cooking has always been enjoyable for our students, and parents often tell us that the enthusiasm spills over at home too. This year,

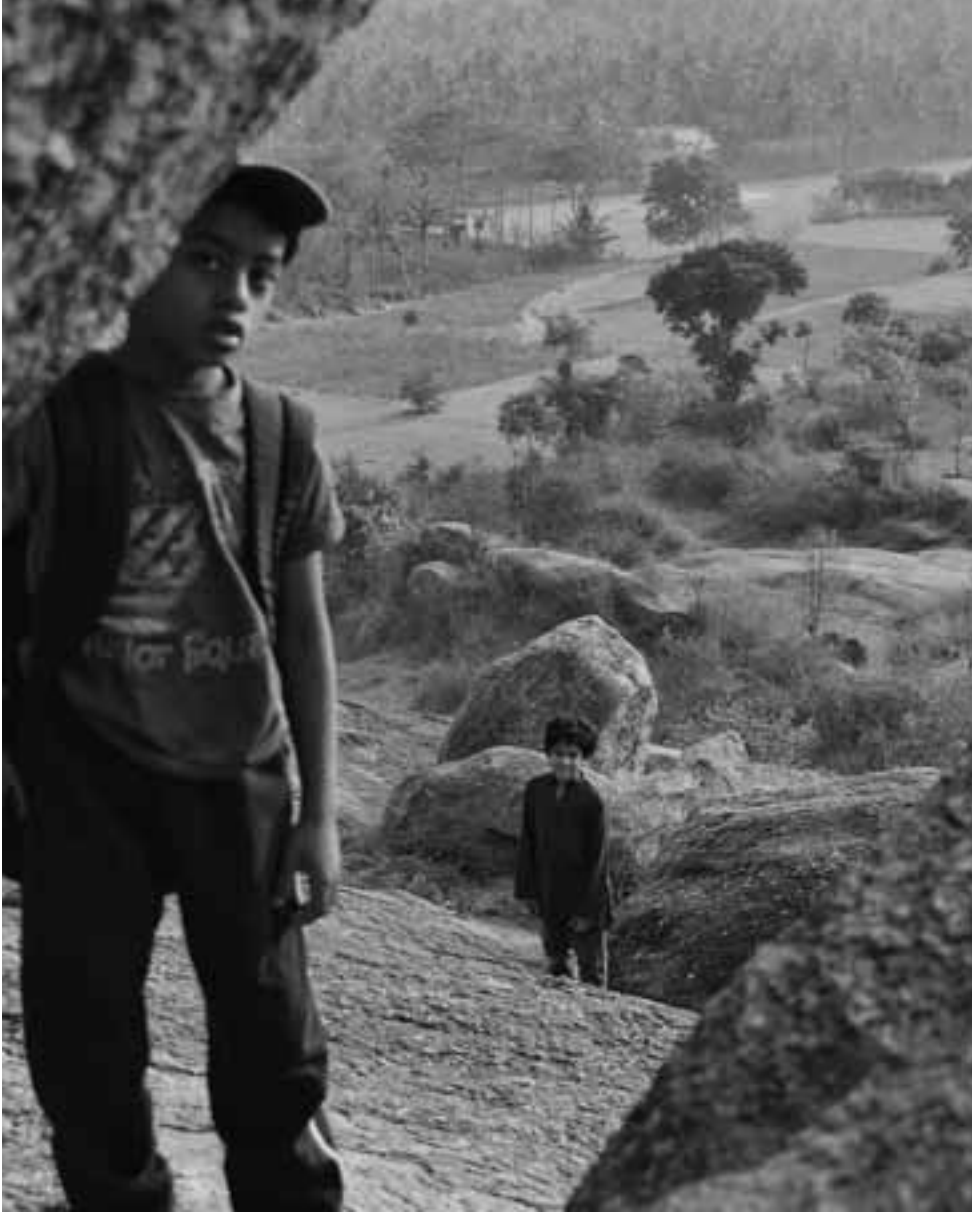
the Saralas, Bilvas, Tamalas, and Mallikas cooked regularly for a term each, and all other groups made an occasional meal. You can feel a general air of excitement on the day when any student group is making a meal: when kids decide the menu, the odds are in favour of an orgy of refined flour and chocolate in various forms. As one ten-year-old said, "We can't make dal and vegetable, we have to cook good food!" The reputation of the group is at stake here—if we make brinjal, what will everyone say?

Being the teacher who cooks with them is a challenge in many ways. You have to gently suggest simple menus with wholesome dishes. (Eventually everyone appreciates what is served, and you get your compliments.) Managing ten children with ten cutting boards and ten knives is itself a task. Even the younger children, however, learn to wash, peel and chop rather well. Stirring with ladles almost their own size, bending precariously over steaming vessels, cleaning up after, and serving the customers—these are all great fun for them. For the teacher, the fun part is subtracting the number of

students at the end from the number of students at the beginning, and calculating how many must have fallen into the pot.

This year we were fortunate to have two dance teachers in our midst! Arthi taught the Palashas and Ketakis folk dance and a jazzy twirling act involving ropes and sand bags. They also got some contemporary dance from Shabari. The year-long activity seemed perfect for this age group, eleven to fourteen-year olds. The Saralas combined dance with their Kannada class, and the Tamalas learned folk dance as a part of a play they put up. All these were performed one evening in March as an end-of-the-year celebration.

Some of the senior students have become very passionate about photography, and Diba has been helping them hone their skills. Toward the third term, they began to meet every week as a group to critique each others' work. Each student then selected a few of his or her favourites and we had an after-dinner slide show with live commentary. Snake photographs got the most oohs and aahs, but the lay audience was very impressed with the entire show. The students ex-



plained what elements of a scene appeal to them, for example, close-ups of nature, strong lines and angles, human portraits. They also shared some of their techniques involving focus and aperture.

As we have reported in previous newsletters, most of our days begin with Assembly singing. This year we tried a new idea: an Open Mike Assembly, where any individual or group can perform a small piece of music for the rest of the school. Shyness is a huge limiting factor in this situation, so although we put up a 'sign-up' sheet prominently in front of the kitchen, we had little hope of it getting filled. We decided not to use any form of persuasion, leaving it completely to student initiative. This had a general relaxing effect; clearly no one was going to be forced! Slowly, over the

weeks, more and more began to add their names to the list, and suddenly we found ourselves with too many performances and not enough time. The Assembly itself was a revelation of musical talent, since several of our students attend music classes outside school. There were guitar, veena, violin and keyboard performances, solos and duets, harmony and ensemble singing. There were even a couple of premiers of students' own compositions. Three months later it was time for another OMA, this time initiated by some students. Musical groups formed across ages and experience. The practice sessions (for which people squeezed time out of who-knows-where) were a lot of fun.

We were treated, early in the year, to a grand Kathakali lecture-demonstration by Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair, one of the seniormost performers of the art. He and his students performed some excerpts of the epics, during the course of which they explained many of the nuances and intricacies of Kathakali. We thank him and his group for a very memorable day.

Retreat in Chennai

In February, a group of CFL teachers visited Vasanta Vihar, the headquarters of the Krishnamurti Foundation India, in Chennai, for a weekend. The KFI had kindly invited us to be part of a retreat and dialogue with their foundation members, sharing questions regarding Krishnamurti's perception of self-learning and its role in education.

Over the two days we were there, we had several discussions on the structure of our psychological selves, as well as our everyday learning about it. We all felt that, for two groups who did not have very much close interaction, we were able to easily communicate on matters close to our hearts.

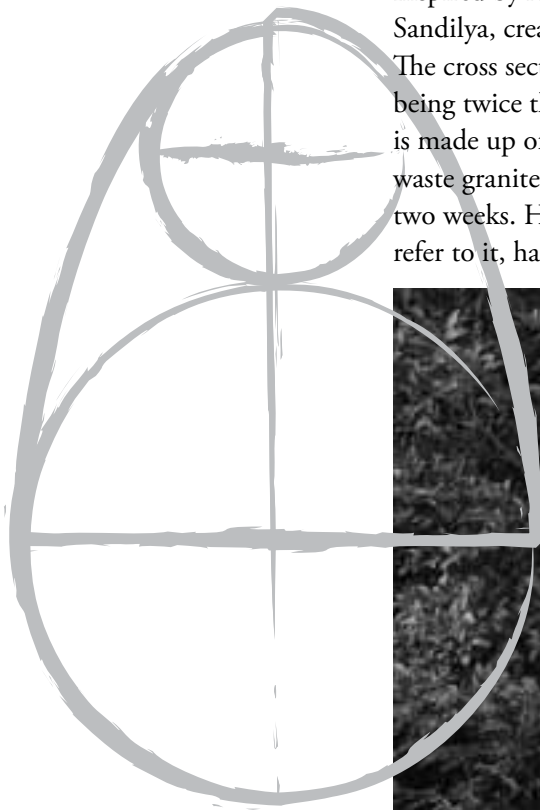
The dialogues, the welcoming and warm atmosphere, as well as the beautiful ambience of Vasanta Vihar, a green island in the heart of Chennai, made our visit very memorable indeed.



Our middle school children interacted with the Varadenahalli primary school students in many fun ways this year, doing art and drama activities together.

A new arrival

Inspired by Andy Goldsworthy and Buddhist Stupas, a former student of CFL, Sandilya, created a stone sculpture in front of the junior school in November 2009. The cross section of the sculpture consists of two circles, the diameter of the larger being twice the size of the smaller. Curved lines connect the two circles. The sculpture is made up of one hundred concentric discs of varying diameter. The material used is waste granite chips and, Sandy built this masterpiece working day and night for about two weeks. He was ably assisted by the support staff at CFL. The egg, as we all fondly refer to it, has taken pride of place among on our campus.





Mischief

In any community, closely knit or otherwise, norms and conventions seem to be what ultimately determine when a person crosses the line of “acceptable” behaviour and enters the dark side. Our internalization of these norms also seems to condition the depth of our emotional responses when we, as adults, perceive some kind of violation of custom. Following this thought, we can hypothesize some perfectly gentle and peaceful society with idealized norms—no murders or genocide, brutality or war—but where the failure to smile and greet an elder in the morning might be cause for tremendous moral outrage and negative emotions of all sorts!

We at CFL are perhaps lucky that the overall culture among the children tends to be quite humane. Either because of some innate tendencies, or because of behavioural precedent, or due to the vigilance of the adults, or some lucky combination of the above, we do not encounter extreme forms of action motivated by malice or the desire to inflict pain. This is not to say that children do not hurt each other and themselves, emotionally; it is merely to say that grievous pain does not seem to be built into or sustained by their overall patterns of relationship (at least from an adult’s perspective!)

Nevertheless, there are clear instances when adults identify “wrong” behaviours among students. These actions of course

can come from any age group, the very young and the not-so-young! Among the junior school children, six to nine year olds, for example, it is considered *de rigueur* to fling the chappals, sandals or shoes of one’s fellow students into the bushes, secretly, often with the aid of an accomplice. This happens frequently enough to disrupt activities and cause general consternation (tears, too). Sometime such an action sparks off repercussions, and there are complex trade-offs and political negotiations, at which point adults often intervene to try to initiate dialogue when things get out of hand.

Now, from the adult’s point of view, such an action—hiding the chappals—is obviously “wrong,” for a wide variety of reasons ranging from ownership, inconvenience and the invocation of the golden rule (“Do unto others...” etc). But what does this transgression signify from the child’s point of view? We might, mentally or otherwise, label an act as a “theft,” for example. But at what age is a child’s appropriating another’s property to be labelled at all? In order to label it, we presuppose that the child has a conceptual framework within which to understand “property.” Or we presuppose that the child has a sufficient capacity for impulse control. Or that the child has a sophisticated sense of social identity, in terms of how others view her. Given the fact that, for young children at least, there may be no awareness of the social meaning of an action, how



best can an adult—who has a keen, perhaps overly keen, sense of the nature of the transgression—respond? Ignoring the issue is obviously not right. Bringing the full force of our moral reasoning to the problem is also inappropriate. As with most issues, the answer seems to lie in walking the tightrope between a keen awareness of where the child is, in terms of “moral” understanding, and a constant communication, both verbal and non-verbal, of expectations and demands, as well as the need for introspection and self-reflection.

As an aside, when the chappal throwing reached a climax, several high-powered teachers sat down with the children and tried the power of moral reasoning on them. One little girl owned up on two separate occasions: from her own account, once because she was very sleepy and wanted to go to bed, and the second time because she was very hungry and wanted to eat her dosas. Logical and moral reasoning obviously have their limits. To this day, we don’t know if she really did it!

And of course, such issues get immensely complex as we consider older and older children. Consider the twelve year old whose textbook or notebook or geometry set routinely go missing. Children often forget to bring their study material to school, and the simplest option is often to quietly pinch your neighbour’s and forget to tell him that you borrowed it. All right, “borrowing” a pencil is fine, but a textbook? A calculator?

A snack that a child has brought from home? Are we treading on the dark side here? Again, the challenge for the adult is to see the action from the child’s developing frameworks; not reacting through our perception of the implications of the act, but from where the child is. And if in our perception, the child has the capacity and maturity to control impulsive behavior or evaluate social meanings but is choosing not to, then of course whatever consequences are appropriate to that setting need to follow.

With the senior-most students, the line between the sense of the teachers as “adults” and the young people as “children” or “students” is held somewhat uneasily. Moral questions are more fraught, particularly since they mostly have to do with relationships and their many-layered complexity. Bringing these points into the open is often painful to the young adult, as this invites close scrutiny from peers and teachers. Other than dialogue, about norms on the one hand and about thought and emotion as the wellsprings of human action on the other, it is not clear what we as adults can “do” in a consciously non-punitive environment. The best we can hope for is that the capacity for insight into the deep causes of a problem can shift habitual patterns of behavior.

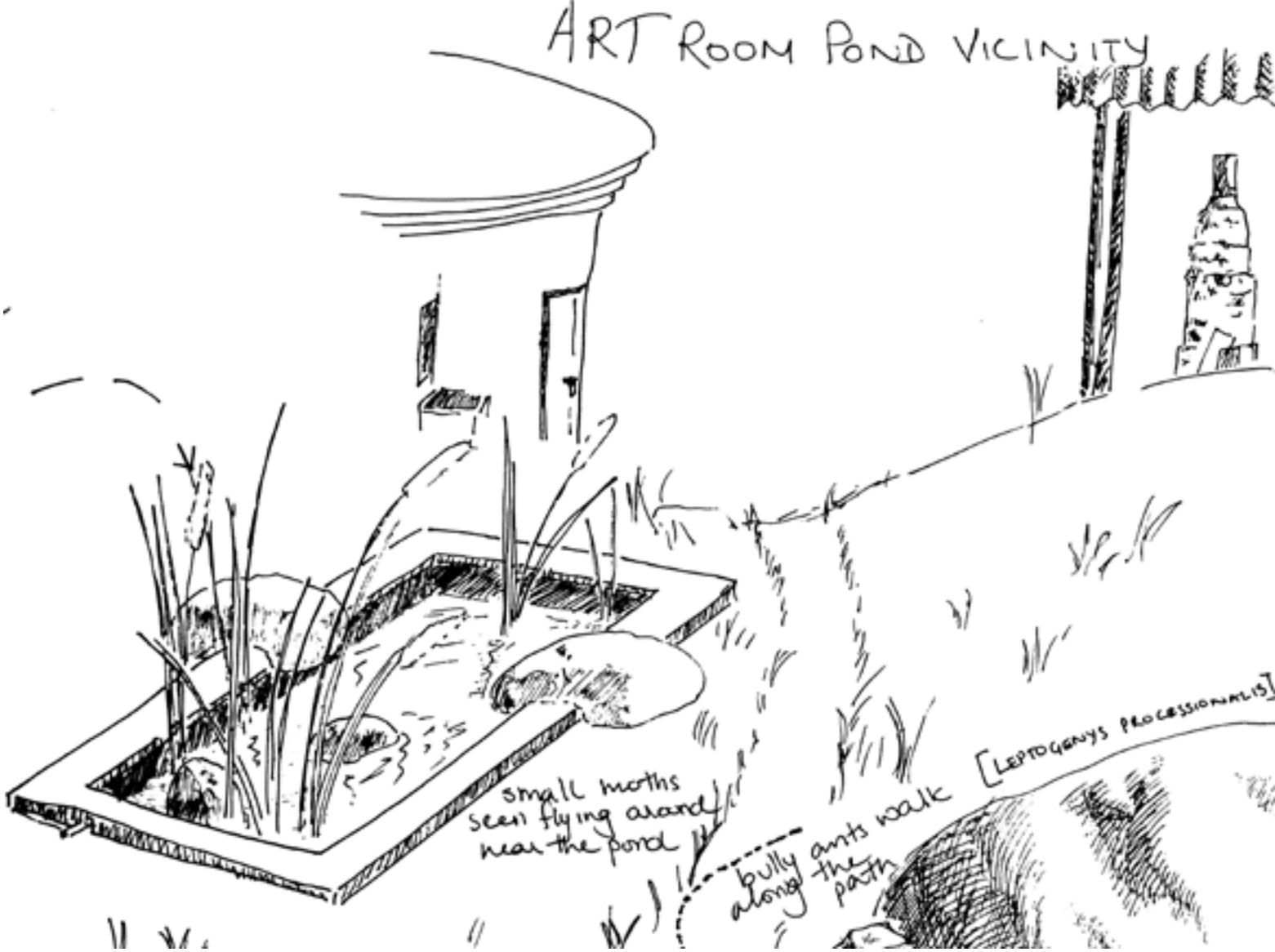


Senior School General Studies

Every year, the senior students in the school work together on a General Studies programme, which is a broad-based course incorporating environmental and social components. The first two terms, the children worked around the issue of Human Rights. With the help of several individuals involved in this area, who spoke to us and gave generously of their time, we did some preliminary readings and conducted field visits to better understand the issues involved. Some of the dimensions of human rights we took up included children's rights, right to health and rights of the disabled, and the right to shelter.

This period of study was a very intense one and left us all with a clear and somehow humbling picture of how different strata in society approach the very basic problems of human existence.

The students have come up with a document based on their work on Human Rights, and you can download this from our website (www.cfl.in).



Here are some excerpts from the document.

“One of my friends came from a family of cobblers. He described how he and all his brothers used to make shoes and sandals every day, and one of them would go to sell the footwear on Commercial Street. His older brothers saved up as much money through various ways, including skipping meals as they could to make sure he could complete his school, and then he did the same for his younger brothers. He told me how he and his older siblings used to make footwear during their school and college vacations to pay for their younger siblings’ school fees.”

“The field trips were the aspects of the GS course that had the most effect on my thinking. Reading something and seeing

it in front of your own eyes are two very different things. The slum visits too were something that shook me. Some of the things that I take for granted, like the water that is there every morning or the electricity (both of which I often even waste), they couldn’t get easily.”

“Sharada’s husband drinks all the money he earns as a carpenter. If he works for one week he can get Rs.1500. If he is does one single night shift he earns Rs.5000. But what does Sharada get, at the end of the day, to manage her household? Rs.30 or sometimes if he is in a good mood, she says, she may get Rs.40. He comes home drunk every evening and beats her up. ‘Even when I am quietly washing the vessels he comes and hits me. Yesterday he hit me so hard on my back; I thought I was going to die.’ He

hits her so hard that sometimes she is unable to work to earn her living. She shows me where her arm is still red and swollen. She says that she is tired of life, of having to get beaten everyday even when there is no fault from her side.”

The list of people to thank for their help in the General Studies course is too long to include here, but we thank them all for their generosity.

In the third term, the students consolidated their nature study and observations. Some of their sketches appear in this newsletter.



Drama

For several years now, our very good friend Gerard Bayle, a theatre person from Paris, has been working with children and adults in CFL on drama related activities. This last year, he visited us for six weeks in the third term and interacted with several groups, as usual.

What strikes us watching him work is of course his tremendous enthusiasm and tireless attention to detail. At the same time, Gerard manages to connect with a wide range of ages and to keep them all engaged with the deeper levels of his art, which is quite amazing to observe.

This year, Gerard worked with the senior students on putting up a play, *An Inspector Calls*, by J B Priestley. The play is set early in the twentieth century, after the First World War, and is focused on a solid middle class family, the Birlings. The father is a prosperous factory owner; his daughter is engaged to be married into another prosperous family; his wife is his prop and support. They are all celebrating the engagement, when suddenly there is a ring at the door: an Inspector has called, with disturbing news. A girl who has worked at the Birlings' factory is dead: a case of suicide. And slowly it emerges that each member of the family, while trying to wash his or her hands off the affair, is actually responsible for her death. As they watch their relationships

crumble, a twist in the tale seems to offer them a way out; in reality it does not. As Gerard puts it, a very Krishnamurti play!

The plot is very intense, and this intensity was reflected by the energy with which the students threw themselves into the play. It affected both actors and viewers in a very profound manner. Several of the students felt that they approached the content with greater and greater maturity and understanding the deeper they got into it.

We thank Gerard for his continuing involvement with the school, and hope to see him here for a long time to come.

At the cultural programme at the end of the year, along with various dance events, the Tamalas (ages 10-11) performed *The Sneetches*, by Dr Seuss. This great story tells the tale of the mutual discrimination and hostility between two (otherwise identical) creatures: the star-bellied Sneetches and the plain-bellied Sneetches. The story was actually used by the UN to promote racial tolerance in Bosnia. The Tamalas gave a multi-lingual rendition of the story (in Hindi and English) which was both extremely touching and wildly humorous.



People

We are happy to welcome a new teacher couple into the school. Krishna and Rupa have been teachers at the Valley School for several years. Rupa will be working with the junior school, while Krishna will be involved with the middle school upwards on a wide range of subjects and activities.

Suseela, who has been a part of the CFL community and the Junior School for many years, left in April. She needed an extra suitcase for the numerous farewell cards made by her little charges. We will miss her enthusiasm with the young ones and her energy for nature walks and circle time! Clive, who has been here for the past two years, also left at the end of the year. We wish them the best in their life and work ahead.

Shabari, a former student who has worked intensively with Junior and Middle School students on dance and theatre activities the past couple of years, is leaving India to pursue a degree in arts education. As she said, she's off to learn some new tricks and will hopefully return to teach us those!

We have grown accustomed to relying on Chitra's energy in many areas: classroom, kitchen, volleyball court! We will feel her absence keenly. We wish her all the best and hope to keep in touch.

Aparna, a parent, has been working in the library three days a week, and her input is very much appreciated.

Kade Finnoff, an old friend of CFL, and her husband Arjun (a former student of the school) were in school for an extended period in the early part of the year. Kade was instrumental in guiding the senior GS programme, and we thank her for her commitment and hard work. Little Azad, AJ and Kade's son, livened our sessions considerably!

Sandra, a visitor from Argentina, was in the school for some weeks in the final term. She helped us in the Junior School and in the kitchen. A group of teachers and students from the Krishnamurti School in Ojai, California, visited us briefly in the winter and interacted with the Senior School.

As usual, many parents volunteered to help in crucial areas of the daily running of the school, particularly the kitchen. You know who you are, and we thank you immensely!

In the Physics lab





Please do visit our website, www.cfl.in, which is due to be redesigned by mid July.

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