

## Challenges of an Urban K School

The School is situated in Madras near the sea and close to the Adyar Estuary on the campus of the Theosophical Society. This campus has old and beautiful trees and is one of the last few habitats of the Banyan Tree in the space-cramped metropolis of Madras. With an old Banyan Tree and one pillared building more than a hundred years old. The School is uniquely fortunate in its location in the city.

This poses in itself a question and a challenge. Outside of the fourteen acres leased from the Theosophical Society is a world far removed from the rhythms which the campus generates. It has paved roads, whizzing traffic, departmental stores and much entertainment. It is this, this world to which children return, after school. This 'world' is very close to The School. This proximity poses a challenge and a dynamic scope for learning to actually happen. The challenge is the daily multiplicity of images and realities, the constant bombardment of media, myths of development, urban pollution and the hype of success.

The challenge is the cut throat competition outside the school gates, the dissipation, the ever-present cynicism, the street-smart hardness and indifference. The world around The School is also full of other schools. Besant Avenue itself has three others, apart from The Olcott School, the school for poor slum children run by the Theosophical Society. CBSE and State Board, IIT and MBBS, Advertising and Catering, Banks and Government Jobs, Polytechnics and Computers, MBA and TDEFL, battle for focus and carry the lure of the good life and a big bank balance. Where, in all this welter of invitations which the student crosses each day as he comes to school, will the invitation to be oneself, to discover oneself, be received? What power of conviction and example can communicate the value of being truly non-competitive, the responsibility of freedom?

The School has struggled, too, to find that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow-the viable example. What does one do in this school, which can convert the many-dimensional nature of the pupil's and the teacher's experience into grist for actual learning to take place? How are the natural rhythms of rural life, and the example they preach, to be substituted? Where does the true picture of that 'other' India, the India which has a great and living heritage of lifestyle and indigenous area-based Science and Technology, find space to emerge?

Certainly not in the painted bill boards on a six-lane road, or even in the accidental anomaly of a cow eating paper off the roadside dustbin. Certainly not through the window of an air-conditioned car as it whizzes past a slum, or in the flats that have broken through the single houses on tree-less roads, or the beggars and hawkers outside a huge departmental store.

These contrasts serve to highlight the dissatisfaction of a sensitive questioner - he or she, faced with such sharp antitheses, grows despondent and fatalistic. The School in handling these descriptions has had to evolve a resilience which allows for the daily perception of compromise and relative truth. The more the anguish, the sharper the perception. The School has had to look for the telling gesture, the shining of anonymous strength, in the daily battle with life. It has had to painfully discover viability and an example of which it can be unashamed.

The School's advantage has been the possibility of looking for urban heroes and heroines - people who are bridging, connecting, exploring and discovering, to be able to link the atrocity of consumeristic life with the all-too-elusive appropriateness of a simple and sustainable life. What context and opportunities can a school utilize to learn about human dignity and relationships? There are a few which The School has tried. In the tradition of K schools everywhere, a wide variety of experiences are introduced to children - art, music, dance, gardening, games and activities like

pottery, carpentry, weaving, Kalari, Bhajans, drama and Home Craft. Students go out of the campus for field visits and study tours. Nature study in our small but rich campus, and in the adjoining Theosophical Society forms an important part of the Environmental Study of the children.

The teaching staff body meet twice every month for half a day to share experiences, draw insights and keep the intention in focus. The Junior, Middle and Senior school teachers meet separately, once every week, to discuss academics, topical concerns and approaches to individual children. The School is richly endowed with facilities and a committed teaching body.

Environmental studies has been made a part of the curriculum for Class VII and an option less sixth subject for class IX and X. The syllabus has been carefully drawn up for class VII, keeping in mind urban challenges and options. Class IX 's syllabus has been prescribed by the ICSE Board itself. The Area Study tried out initially without a specific environmental focus, is now part of the Environmental studies package for Class VII and is definitely to their environmental perspective. The School has been able to offer ES in Class XI and XII is the work of the enthusiasm of students and the readiness of the Council.

The other School-specific activity we have initiated is the Rota. Simply put, all children above Class IV take turns laying out the lunch, cleaning up the plates after lunch and taking charge of their own classrooms. This has helped urban school children immensely in understanding the dignity of labour and has also expanded their concept of work.

The advantage of an urban school is the availability of people for various educational purposes. We have had many opportunities of creatively engaging with experts in various fields, both in academics, different activities and in the area of environment. We recently had for example a very interesting Workshop on National Dyes by the well-known expert, K.V. Chandramouli, and an interesting talk on astronomy by Dr V. Haridas of the MATSCIENCE institute. The exodus from the village to the city is never so marked as in this disparity between the haves and havenots, the users and the used. With what understanding must our young hold these wide despair and so much poverty?

The place of academics influences all other types of learning in schools today. There is great emphasis on ranks and marks, and the city is the pressure-cooker of such feelings. As a society, we simply have not been able to establish the right place for academics without the vicious undertow of competition. Any attempt to search for a just balance comes in for criticism and is resisted by society with the age-old agreement - 'The world is so'. While everyone will agree that an all-round education is most desirable, it is also widely accepted that a maths class is more important than music or pottery or even history.

All these challenges ..... new would be born.

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