

## Experiences with the Varadenahalli School Children

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There are thousands of people working with our government school system to improve learning conditions and psychological outcomes for students. For these dedicated people, I feel deep appreciation and admiration. I myself teach in a non-formal private school (Centre For Learning), and most of us teachers and students come from city backgrounds. One of the many objectives of the CFL education is to connect with lives and worlds outside our own, to break our bubbles of physical comfort and self-indulgence from time to time. We do this in several ways, one of which is to engage regularly with students from the nearby village primary school. From the start, we have seen that the Varadenahalli children treasure these interactions too, so we continue them year after year. I hope to share in this article some of what we have observed and learned from these rich and varied sessions. However, it is clear that we can share neither the depth nor the breadth of experience of those who work full-time with government schools, and therefore I offer these points in humility.

Our school, Centre For Learning, with around 75 students, is located in Varadenahalli, a village 40 km away from Bangalore city. There are around 100 homes here, with a range of affluence. Most families have at least a few acres of land, some in addition a shop or a tractor and some rely on daily wages to survive. The village has a primary school housed in a small two-room building, run by two dedicated and affectionate teachers. There are about 22 children here, a number that has reduced dramatically over the last several years. (When we first came here in 2000, there were nearly 60 children in the primary school.) Our neighbouring village, Bachenahatti, has an upper primary school. After Class 5 children from Varadenahalli walk there and the school attracts children from several surrounding villages. In spite of this, their enrolment has also plummeted in recent years. We suppose that this reduction has to do with some larger sociological factors across the country.

Since the year 2000, we have been doing mini-projects with a joint group of government school

students and CFL students (either middle school or seniors). Over the years we have done all these things with students: bilingual drama, playing games, math, science, history, English songs, dance, pottery, art and craft (painting, sketching, embroidery, collage, paper weaving) and a formal programme of English as a Second Language. The format is usually a weekly ninety-minute session for three months at a time.

The village school children form bonds of affection and trust with our students and with us in no time. They are eager and excited about the weekly interactions, partly because of the novelty of spending time with outsiders, and partly because of the activities we do. They are keen to learn and do anything we suggest. Some (mostly the girls and those children who come from poorer, lower-caste homes in the village) are shy. The caste-class correlation in Varadenahalli is apparent in the way that affluence, skin colour, size and confidence levels go together among the children. They form their own divisions, perhaps mimicking those of the adults: who they will work with or sit next to.



Their transition from being utterly obedient and subdued to becoming unruly and mischievous is quite sudden! When we visit them at their school, they are very 'well-behaved' and this demeanour

carries on into their first couple of weeks of coming to CFL. The space we provide them here is relatively unstructured in a few important ways: no desks and benches to restrict movement, no blackboard to gather the attention, no mechanical tasks to keep them occupied. Crucially, they have a larger space to move about in than they are used to, and we like them to have some time in each session to run around freely. After a few sessions of this, they go a little wild. I am delighted to stand back and watch the fun while our CFL students try to manage this chaos. When things get out of hand, they resort to threats—Aunty karithini, aunty barthaidare—and this always works!



As I mentioned, we deliberately construct activities which push the children to think independently, and to discover their own expression and creative urges. We realise that for understandable reasons, they have been trained to repeat, to copy, and to speak in chorus. In the CFL sessions they are told: ‘What do you think?’ or ‘Don’t look at his book, you draw the way you see it.’ Our experience has been something like the following: when asked to draw whatever they feel like, most of them will draw a three-step flag post and the Indian flag. When asked to draw a plant, they will all draw more or less the same plant. Then we seat them in front of a plant and say: draw this plant. Even then, some of them will draw the fixed plant from their imagination. Eventually, with repeated and patient urging, they begin to draw from their own observation, and this process is something lovely to watch. Once we asked Class 7 students to draw a cubical box which was placed in front of them. The idea was to learn to depict a 3D object in the 2D plane of the paper. It

is not an easy task for anyone who has not learned the ‘trick’ (see figure), and nothing they knew could be immediately put on paper. This exercise brought forth some very unusual and creative drawings. But the moment we commented on any one drawing as being nice or interesting, several others would give up the struggle and try to copy that one!

One extreme example of this tendency comes from a history project that we did with the Class 5 children (we were using Deepa Dhanraj’s film for ideas and inspiration). They learned how to draw a family tree beginning from their grandparents and they were each to make their own at home by asking family members for as many names as possible. The next week when I asked to look at the sheets, there was some giggling among the girls, and then they showed me—identical family trees! They happily informed me that they had all copied from Anasuya (she was clearly the acknowledged ‘good student’ in class). I turned to the boys and asked for their sheets. One of them grabbed Anasuya’s and started copying it! It took a while and a lot more giggling to explain that Anasuya’s grandmother was not everyone’s grandmother, and so on...

Over the years we have noticed a few things that worry us, things that strike us because we make the comparison to CFL students. Firstly, Varadenahalli students are quite a bit smaller on average than their same-age peers at CFL. Even though I know from general statistics that, among rural children in India, stunted growth is widespread, seeing it with my own eyes is always a bit of a shock, especially because this village is not very impoverished.

Secondly, while they are full of energy and very bright, we find that some activities we plan for and expect to be relatively ‘easy’ (such as keeping a beat by clapping) are surprisingly difficult for them.

And third, we notice persistent problems in learning English pronunciation and grammar (simple English sentences we teach can get distorted within a week, forever fixing garbled versions in memory). Perhaps there is a connection between these observations. Psychological research points to a cluster of abilities of the brain called ‘executive function’ as being very important for school and life. A recent Harvard University publication describes it thus:

‘... the ability to hold onto and work with information, focus thinking, filter distractions, and switch gears ... Scientists refer to these capacities as executive function and self-regulation.’

This description seems to fit the difficulties we see in the Varadenahalli children.

What could be the root cause of these difficulties? Could it be that the Varadenahalli children have fewer opportunities and exposure to cognitively challenging activities at home, in the neighbourhood and at school, such as reading or playing indoor and outdoor games? Alternatively, could it be a nutritional issue, beginning from early childhood? A 2007 Lancet paper, titled Child development: risk factors for adverse outcomes in developing countries, explains that school readiness and achievement are compromised by a four key risk factors for millions of children in the developing world: stunting, inadequate cognitive stimulation, iodine deficiency and iron deficiency anaemia.



This link between nutrition, stunting and executive function strikes us as important. CFL started supplying egg, milk and fruit, and a few years later the government initiated a similar scheme which was good news indeed. The primary school teachers are bringing in different and interesting activities, thanks to their in-service workshops and their own growth as teachers. A recent experience made me realise and be grateful for the openness with which these teachers have for so many years regarded our requests for time with their students. The new headmaster of another nearby school, where our seniors are working with Class 6 and 7 students on Arvind Gupta's Pumps from the Dump, told me: 'If you were doing something from the textbook, then it would be of some use to the students. What you are doing doesn't help them at all.' The Varadenahalli school teachers have never questioned the value of our sessions, and we hope we deserve their trust in us!

We have learned and gained so much from interacting with the Varadenahalli students. The unconditional affection from the children, the intensity of their experiences, the excitement and energy of the sessions, make an intoxicating mix! CFL students on their part show a degree of patience and kindness that they do not often show to each other. It is a very real opportunity for them to see the need to be responsible for another person's learning.

**References:**

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