

Redefining itself: New Creation Bilingual School, now Aikiyam School

More than 200 children ranging in age from 3 to 13, receive academic and vocational education from crèche through 8th grade in Tamil and English.

Most people know the small white buildings, shaped like UFOs, under the enormous banyan trees on the left of the road immediately after entering Auroville's New Creation settlement. They were built in the early eighties by architect André Hababou, at the request of his friend André Tardeil, who had a vision and passion to create a bridge between Auroville and the impoverished population of neighbouring Kuilyapalayam and other local villages, by providing opportunities for informal education, training and earning a living.

In the early years these buildings served as a rural training centre, housing small carpentry and tailoring shops, as well as the beginnings of school facilities, often all mixed together. As there was, apart from a Panchayat primary school up to 5th standard, no other school in the neighbourhood, children eagerly came to the new school. Gradually the 'UFOs' were joined by other workshops and classroom buildings to create the well organised lively school campus that it is now.

Beginnings

In the early years several other Aurovilians joined André Tardeil to provide the basics of an education for the village children, but it was only in 1990 that the classrooms and curriculum began to be consolidated. Invited by André and encouraged by Auroville's Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIIER), Roy Wicks, a retired British police officer, arrived in the premises, established some order, and added the bilingual dimension with English classes and some teaching in English. He promoted a more interactive and diversified curriculum than the standard Indian listen-and-repeat approach, or the alternative, 'total freedom without responsibility'.

The mainly untrained Tamil staff worked hard to assimilate this new philosophy and the strategies which accompanied it. The new approaches were introduced at first by educationist Greta Jackson, also from Britain, who offered a variety of play-way methods, and then by Heidi Watts, a professor from Antioch University in the United States. Heidi began coming regularly for a few months each winter to work with schools and teachers in Auroville and was, and is, a frequent visitor to the New Creation Bilingual School (NCBS).

During the early nineties, the first turn towards a more formal education at NCBS emerged. While André did not entirely agree with a more structured approach to schooling, it was generally appreciated and seen as effective, and fund-raising efforts were rewarded. Among these were substantial grants from the European Commission to build vocational training centres and a computer lab.

"From when Roy came the school only went up," says Pugazhendi, one of the school's earliest teachers. When Roy left for the U.K. in 2001 for medical reasons, the supervision was taken over by a British couple, Mike and Sue, both educators, who introduced assessment techniques and began insisting on prior preparations for classes and adherence to a curriculum. Their good work is still apparent in the school. When they left three years later, there was a leadership vacuum.

The new team

Early in 2005, Heidi and Martin Littlewood of AVI UK felt that something had to be done about this lack of effective leadership in NCBS. The general discontent among village youth was high and it seemed that the best help Auroville could offer to the younger generation of the bioregion was good and solid education, both academic and vocational. Martin and Heidi consulted with Sanjeev of SAIIER and approached some long-term Aurovilians if they were willing to form a management team or 'support group' for the school. Janet (Canadian), Mauna (Dutch), Shankar and Suryagandhi (both Indian) accepted the challenge and were much later joined by Dianna (British), Françoise (French) and Franca (Italian). No one of these individuals had a clear notion of what lay ahead, but all consented to give the management of the school a try, in addition to their regular commitments in Auroville. Fortnightly meetings soon became weekly gatherings. What became immediately apparent was that the school needed a principal. Up to this point there had only been 'directors' responsible for the overall running of the school but never a 'principal' responsible for the children, teachers, and curriculum. Fortunately, Shankar who was then teaching at Auroville's 'Last School', agreed to take up the position. As a Kuilyapalam native well known in the villages and in Auroville, and an experienced teacher with a Masters Degree in Tamil and second language teacher training, he seemed tailor-made for the job.

Challenges

And so the real work began. There was considerable resistance to change from the teachers who had been used to Western leadership and could not accept that a Tamil principal could do the job. Old misunderstandings and frictions that had built up between New Creation's original initiators and the past leaders of the school also had to be resolved. The Support Group had to move slowly. It had conversations with the teachers where expectations were firmly defined, regular attendance supervision was introduced, as was a school uniform, the latter done to avoid visual differences in the students' economic status.

As principal, Shankar initiated thrice-weekly meetings with the teachers, and was present at the school every day from 8:00am until 6:00pm. Gradually, the Support Group inched forward, bonding as a team, inspired by their common passion to provide underprivileged children a comprehensive and sound education. Health professional Suryagandhi, one of the members of the Support Group says: "In the beginning I was afraid to join a group with all these different nationalities! But Heidi and Sanjeev encouraged me. 'Do it for the children', they said. Now I can say that I am very happy with the way we work. Sometimes we don't agree but we always come out of it. It naturally happened that each of us has a specific function in the team. It works!"

That it works is clear from the smooth functioning of the school and the visible progress on all fronts, from teacher competence and accountability, to the enthusiasm and cheer evident in the faces of the children. After the first year, positive feedback started coming in from grateful parents who saw that things were changing through the behaviour of their children, meetings with teachers in the school, and a new venture, an active Parents-Teachers Association. They also appreciated the vocational classes held bi-weekly in computer use, tailoring and woodwork, singing, dancing and art, and an everyday sports programme.

M.J. Kumar, a local entrepreneur and father of three daughters who study in the school feels that since Shankar joined as principal, the school has become more strict, something he is very happy about. "We can be proud of it," he says. "I can see in the way my daughters now prepare for the school day and *want* to do their homework, that it has become real for them. Before ShankarSir, the school was about eating and playing; now it is not only eating and playing but also learning." He says that his youngest daughter, now in upper Kindergarten, is doing much better than her elder sibling. "She's 100% Kindergarten. But the older one who is now in 4th standard, missed this serious basic training in Kindergarten and I can see that she lacks something."

Another parent Mercy, wife of a coolie, and mother of three children in the school, expresses her satisfaction with the current education the school offers, the child care, and the nutrition provided for the children. "I'm somewhat educated myself," she says, "but can't express in English while my children can. They correct my pronunciation, and this is very good as English is the common language all over the world. My son tells me everything he learned at school that day!

"Also..., in our homes, we beat our children when they do something wrong, but at the school the teachers talk with them and find a solution. This I like very much." Mercy also appreciates the special tutoring sessions that the school offers which her second child benefits from, as well as the field trips organised within and outside Auroville. "I'm grateful for all this."

A major challenge for the school continues to be finances. The school has no regular income and opens its doors to children of the lowest income groups without charging any fees. "We function separately from the French-oriented Free Progress Child Development Centre elsewhere in the New Creation settlement," says Support Group member Janet. "Contrary to the general assumption, the school does not receive any share from New Creation's taxi service or its restaurants. Quite naturally people think that some of this income is channelled into the school, but this is not and has never been the case." To avoid further confusion between the two organisations, NCBS has this year changed its name into Aikiyam School, 'Aikiyam' meaning "harmony, oneness of the soul with those of each other and the Divine, unity in diversity", in both Tamil and in Sanskrit.

While basic expenses, such as most teacher and staff salaries, maintenances, nutrition expenses, and some essential equipment and repairs come out of Auroville's Unity Fund via SAIIER, it is insufficient to run the school properly and to keep up the strong momentum built up thus far. To overcome its financial handicap, the school has for the past four years been regularly publishing a colourful, quarterly newsletter reaching out to Auroville International Centres and other potential donors in Auroville, India and abroad. In it, appeals for funds to support specific projects are made. Response has been forthcoming, as in the case of Priyannam, the school kitchen that doubles as a dining hall funded by a well-wisher. The same donor also offered seed money for the construction of an additional climate-appropriate school building. In early 2009, this was augmented by funding from the German Government, and presently a new library-cum-science lab is under construction, which also houses a space for Aikiyam's therapeutic 'Special Needs' sessions.

CBSE accreditation

Having applied for it with the approval of SAIIER, in 2007 the school received provisional affiliation for a period of three years from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). CBSE promotes creative education at all levels through the application of learning by doing, the teacher's role is to be 'shifted from being a source of knowledge to being a facilitator', while resources available in the child's own environment are to be utilised as unifying themes for different subjects. Its general values and approaches were sufficiently consistent with the integral education followed by Aikiyam's team that it had dared to undergo the severe testing by CBSE. The resulting accreditation is quite unique: nowhere else in India has a school in an underprivileged area become CBSE-affiliated and recognised.

Being a CBSE school means that the children will no longer have to sit for State Board exams based on rote learning in grade eight but will write exams approved by CBSE in grade ten at New Era Secondary School (NESS, earlier known as After School), an Auroville-run CBSE high school for village children. For those children who want to go to a State Board high school instead of NESS, Aikiyam School is from this year onward entitled by CBSE to give a recognised 'school leaving' certificate.

A unique experiment

Slowly the uniqueness of the Aikiyam School experiment in integral education for village children, based on the principles of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, is beginning to be noticed. Here is an environment where the concept of 'human unity' is a direct and natural experience lived through the mix of an eastern-western team of teachers, volunteers and trainers. The open curiosity and freshness of the students themselves is another of the school's precious assets.

Says Shankar, the principal, "These last four years have been a true challenge for us all, but we are moving ahead and the evidence of this is all around us, especially in the children's smiling faces. We are on the way to becoming a model school for rural areas. The encouragement and trust expressed by the parents, and the fact that they don't transfer their children to other schools any more, speaks for itself. We have a caring, qualified and committed team of 17 Aurovilians, 7 Newcomers and 16 employees, of whom six have degrees in education and five have teaching diplomas. The fact that western Aurovilians and Newcomers are now joining the school's staff, that more and more exchange takes place between other Auroville Schools and Aikiyam, that our children participate in Auroville's yearly Nature Camps, and that we are able to organise successful science and other exhibitions, are promising indicators.

"Our 200+ children benefit immensely from the increased self-esteem and enthusiasm of the teachers. With malnutrition, disease, domestic violence and general neglect still occurring in our area, some of the children suffer from traumas that are not being addressed at home. This translates to a fairly large percentage of our students having some learning disability. But through their work with qualified trainers and the introduction of individual education plans, all our teachers have now discovered that 'slow learners' or 'dull' kids may not be 'slow' or 'dull' at all – they may just need another approach to open up. We are grateful that our school now has a 'Special Needs' team that works therapeutically with these children. There is no greater joy in the school than when a small child in our crèche or kindergarten, who just never spoke or laughed, suddenly opens up and communicates!"

During a recent group interaction amongst the Aikiyam team, the members of the Support Group were deeply touched when a teacher shared her experience. "In the beginning we didn't like it when you asked us to prepare the classes better, work on ourselves a bit, and so on", she said. "But now I understand that you have been stimulating us in the same way that we now stimulate our children!"

Says Shankar: "This seems a good enough beginning of integral education to me."

Mauna, in collaboration with other members of Aikiyam School's support group

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