Vanakkam Aikiyam Friends

As every rain brings physical change to the land, every year and term brings change in children and also in our campus. Our Wisdom building classrooms have been in use by our 6th, 7th and 8th graders since July, and were formally inaugurated on September 29th by the new Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Mohan Verghese Chunkath I.A.S. (ret’d). Unfortunately our dear friend Mr. Akshai Mehta, son of the late Vasanthlalbhai and Kokilaben Mehta, was unable to be present at the inauguration.

The Harmony Building, financed by the Government of India, has been growing steadily, and will be ready for use in a few months.

There was a festive mood on our campus during the first term and a thematic dress-up show by the children to celebrate Teachers’ Day and Children’s Day together on campus. In the past, the parents of our children did not show up when the school would celebrate special events, but recently parents show a greater interest in our activities. I think we are slowly starting to impact the parents too.

We are very happy to share a few glimpses of our activities and hope you enjoy reading about them. Aum .... Shankar

I like our Wisdom building because it is so big and beautiful. The shape of the new building is different from our old buildings.

The ground floor has four rooms, one room for the 8th graders, one room for Hindi and the Special Needs Program, a nice bathroom for our teachers, and the fourth room is being used as the battery room.

The first floor has three rooms. One is for 6th graders, another for 7th graders and the third is used for multiple purposes, like having meetings; sometimes we use it as our video room and some teachers even use it for giving classes.

The building has beautiful doors, and sliding windows. We get a nice breeze through the open windows. The whiteboards in the rooms are something new for us. We have blackboards in our old buildings.

Just in front of our class we have some space to sit and do our work with our friends. This is my final year at Aikiyam and I really feel blessed that I got an opportunity to enjoy my learning in this new building. It’s a pleasure learning here in such a wonderful environment from my teachers and friends.
On September 29th at the Wisdom Building dedication at Aikiyam School, I saw the Support Group members as the human pillars that continuously support our ability to improve the lives of more village children.

It takes donors to pay for new buildings with classrooms and I feel great appreciation for today's and all the improvements to our campus that I have seen over my 16 years of teaching at Aikiyam School. Thank you donors and Aikiyam School Support Group members!

**Professional Development (Part 2)**

This is the second part of a discussion with Heidi, Françoise and Shankar. The first part appeared in our June Newsletter.

**Question:** Can you give some examples of what you have offered for professional development?

**Françoise:** I have been advising and working mostly with Shankar. I am working with the principal and then it is passed on to the teachers. We did something quite nice together, mapping and assessing strengths and needs at the beginning of the school year. We asked what has to go better this year, and what steps are we taking so that it happens. We had a morning workshop with the teachers, which was really down to earth. We looked at the material condition of the school, the children, the classrooms, and the relationship with the parents. The workshop covered all the areas of what happens in a school. We separated the teachers into different groups to concentrate on different topics. In each group a large paper was circulated so each teacher could write his/her idea, and afterwards we put everything together, and then decided what to concentrate on for the following year, and thought about how we were going to assess it.

**Shankar:** Some issues came up like how to deal with homework. Do we have to give it or not? How do we explain the homework to the children, and what should be the amount? We also talked about classroom rules. Instead of making 12 classroom rules, and not following any of them, it would be better to have a maximum of three or four rules, which would seriously be followed. And when we were talking about the rules, we were talking about the involvement of the children, while they were making rules. Teachers have to involve children. This session was for teachers but children have to be involved in the process of making rules, so they share the authority to implement the rules.

**Q:** What are the challenges?

**Shankar:** When a new problem emerges, it's always a challenge. Anything we learned how to deal with is fine, but if a new issue comes up, we have to figure out a new response.

**Françoise:** Something can be good for a while, and then it's not appropriate any more. In the case of volunteers, it was great to have them coming from outside, because it was a natural way for the children and teachers to speak English, and it was a way for the children to broaden their contact with the world, and with different nationalities. But now we know, when there are too many volunteers, there are also problems, so we have to balance and keep harmony in what we are doing. We always have to look at where we are at any given moment.

**Heidi:** I think one of our main challenges is that our standards keep changing. Things that were once okay for us are no longer okay. And as the school gets better, we will see more need for improvement. English is still a problem for communication with teachers, and for speaking and teaching in English. Another challenge is that we have not yet worked out how to deal adequately with our special needs children. We need to help teachers increase their understanding and expertise with special needs and we need to make some structural changes in the program. We have a large number of children who come out of poverty, from homes where sometimes there is abuse, alcoholism, and sometimes not enough to eat. We have children who will never be able to deal with academic work very well, but many children can do better if we can find better ways to help them. For instance, we are now working on a new initiative to design a vocational
training program for some of these children or others who wish to learn a skill which will make them employable.

**Shankar:** For every child who comes with a special need, we have to diagnose exactly what the problems are, and then we have to think about the right response. An individualized educational plan will work, but the length of time this will take to plan and implement is a challenge.

**Q:** What has been the most effective?

**Françoise:** It's difficult to answer because it's a lot of different things. It includes new buildings, people coming from outside, better books, better programs, I don't know. It's difficult even to know the turning point. It has been altogether like a movement. At first we didn't know where to start because we had so few materials, not much money, no real skills, and a diverse student body. It was difficult at the beginning, but then slowly, when we tried to answer the different problems in the best way we could, there was momentum forwards.

**Shankar:** This is my eleventh year here with the Support Group. The most effective change I have seen is that the 45-minute or one-hour lecture is not happening anymore. It's not anymore teachers talking constantly. It means that children have to work and talk in order to show their understanding. The student's learning is the focus rather than the teacher's teaching.

**Heidi:** It's hard to identify any specific change as most effective because, as Françoise said, it is such a different school now. Physically you can see it in the buildings. We have a science lab, a library, a dry, attractive kindergarten without rats. Children are very active, smiling, and busy, people are moving purposefully from one building to another. More teachers are really working at teaching, learning new methods, preparing and reflecting, and the school management is more coherent, consistent, and teacher friendly. It's a different school. It's a school that's still growing, but there is definite progress. Even the nature of the challenges has changed. We are clearer about them and there are less of them. My goal is that this becomes a model school for integral education in Tamil Nadu. We are not there yet, but there is real hope that one day we could be.

**My Visit to the USA By Grade Four Teacher, Selvaraj**

Jean Eislie, a professor from the University of Washington – Bothell, who comes every year to our Aikiyam School and does the International Partner Story Project with different classes and teachers, invited me for the month of May, this year, 2016 to visit some schools in the US and the different campuses of the University of Washington. She has been inviting me since 2009, but I have been refused a visa without any reasonable explanation. Since 9/11 it has not been easy for Indians to get a visa to the US. After seven years and four efforts at a visa interview, this time, the fourth time, I got the visa and I was so proud and glad to visit USA. I felt that this was one of the greatest achievements of my life.

**My Adventures in Seattle, Washington:**

It was a very great adventure for me to be in Seattle with Jean, and a very new exploration. I had the opportunity to visit three different schools in different districts of Seattle, Woodmoor Elementary School and Thornton Creek Elementary School, both in Bothell, where Jean lives, and View Ridge Elementary School. I made several presentations about our Aikiyam School, and our villages, people, and lifestyles, and of course...
Auroville to University of Washington students. I had some visits and home stays with AVI USA members and spent time boating, sightseeing, and eating good food. I had a chance to meet two of our International Partner Story project teachers, and I also met one of Aikiyam’s former volunteers, Tina Farias.

It was just a pleasant welcoming for me in the schools, and I felt so happy being there. It was just two weeks, but it gave me lots of practical experiences of learning rather than just being on a theoretical campus. During my school and college studies in India, we didn’t have any supplies to learn with, but in the Seattle schools there were lots and lots of resources. I would say that one US classroom has enough resources to run an entire outreach school in Auroville. Also, I would like to build up a partnership between our school and one of the schools in Seattle in any way that is possible to work out in the future.

I also learned a lot from how these schools handle such things as morning meeting, rules for the classroom, changing the seating arrangements, organizing the classroom, having more fun and games with the students, encouraging more reading and sorting out the levels. I am planning to try out their methods for sorting out the records for reading levels with the library books, and connecting with the special needs classroom. I want to have a school map and to get parents involved in the classroom. I saw the importance of signing up in the office for everyone, creating awareness for Physical Education, allowing students to have snacks inside the classroom, and having at least one computer in the classroom, etc.

Sooooooo much I learnt from the teachers, students, volunteers, parents and especially from the displays on the walls, desks, cupboards, charts, etc. Such a wonderful learning atmosphere! What an unforgettable experience of school life in America!

My Adventures in Keene, New Hampshire:

I was picked up by Heidi Watts from Boston Airport and she drove me to her home. There, she offered me the precious opportunity of attending a 4 weeks summer course at Antioch University in Keene, New Hampshire. The courses were ‘Exceptional Children, and Music as Social History’, ‘Exceptional Children, and The First Six Weeks of School’, ‘Special Educational Assessment’, and ‘Place-based Social Studies’.

There were many activities, many new games, and many other new visiting arrangements. All the sessions were taught by experienced faculty, and gave me a rich learning experience. I learned so much from everywhere that I have visited. I will be forever thankful to our Aikiyam School, which helped me to go to the other side of the world.

Overall, it was a great opportunity to experience the deeper meaning behind what Sri Aurobindo said about education, “Nothing can be taught, The mind needs to be consulted in its own growth, and to work from near to far…” And so, a very big thank to the Divine too!!!

Thank you Aikiyam, by Jana Mengeu, German Volunteer

I came to Aikiyam School in August 2015 through Weltwaerts. During my one year stay at the school I was mainly working together with Selvaraj in 4th grade, helping with teaching English, Science, Social Science, and Maths. I did some little projects in Integral Art as well.

I loved working with the children of Aikiyam. They are so utterly open and sincere that sometimes I couldn’t believe what was happening in that very moment. I really feel that the love I gave them was mirrored back with an even bigger power. Also, Selvaraj, the teacher with whom I was working, did really help me to get into teaching. But not only did I enjoy working with him, which meant planning, preparing and eventually teaching, I also found somebody, I could trust, to talk to. Whether it was topics related to India as a whole and its politics, or things like caste, poverty and arranged marriages, or the family situation of the children, I could speak frankly with him.

I am grateful, Aikiyam for this valuable and unforgettable year.

You can send your donation via the Auroville International Centre in your country, or send a cheque made payable to ‘Auroville Unity Fund’, Town Hall, Auroville, 605101 Tamil Nadu, INDIA indicating clearly that the donation is for Aikiyam School, or you can send it electronically by going to http://www.auroville.com/donations/ and following the instructions.