

The Learning Network Newsletter

Dear Reader

Welcome to "Chiguru", the first newsletter of the newly formed "**Learning Network**". "Chiguru" meaning 'new growth' signifies our energy and enthusiasm for the progress of this network! We are glad and excited to provide this update on happenings after the initial interactions between groups present at the Bangalore conference on "Alternatives in Education" held in January, 2003.

Since the conference, there have been interesting exchanges via workshops, training sessions and seminars. For this newsletter, we have received reports on some of these activities, which have been included here. Some groups that are looking at education from a different perspective and who are doing innovative work have also been profiled.

We need your contributions to make this newsletter a medium of sharing, learning and disseminating information. We invite all of you to send your experiences in schools, articles for teachers, articles on philosophy of education and educators, teacher experiences, articles explaining government directives, information and review of books and materials, information on programs and seminars, your opinion on current and new trends in education and other various issues that you have been thinking about. We invite you all to also send your ideas likewise for the newly formed virtual resource center, <http://www.learningnet-india.org>. Please send your contributions to info@learningnet-india.org or write to the postal address given in the "Contact Us" section.

Thank you and best regards,
The Newsletter Team

About the Learning Network

The Learning Network was formed as a result of the interactions between groups at the "Alternatives in Education" conference held in January 2003, Bangalore.

This network hopes to provide new dimensions to existing activities of its members in exploring various alternative approaches to education. This network will help address issues with the conventional system, provide new perspectives, strengthen existing individual efforts and be a resource for interested groups, educators, and parents seeking meaningful approaches to education.

Some of the actively pursued goals of this network for this year include forming a virtual resource center, which would be a database of the member groups, their philosophies, methodologies, and areas of expertise, creating a resource handbook mirroring the virtual resource center, organizing teacher trainings and children camps and publishing newsletters, all with the goal of sharing, learning and disseminating relevant information.

Alternatives in Education

January 2003, Conference Summary

"Alternatives in Education" conference was organized by "Asha for Education" in January 2003, Bangalore. The conference brought together groups working in various areas impacting a child's education. They discussed ways in which one can go beyond the limits of the existing education system and provide complete and holistic education. Over 80 people attended this conference. A total of 20 groups from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh and DPEP government officials of Karnataka presented their work at this conference. The range of topics covered included innovative teaching/learning methodologies, differing philosophies on what education should accomplish, increasing community participation and ownership, working within government structures, and creating educational resources. The presentations evoked a lot of interest in learning from each other's experiences. An exhibition of the resources, teaching aids and learning materials used by the groups was also organized at the venue. Their work and presentation shows that education institutions and practices can indeed generate avenues for children to learn not just skill sets, but also engage in joyful learning, shape their overall personalities, and contribute to a better society.

Past Activities Update Kuvempu Teachers Training

Members of Kuvempu Trust, Chitradurga, Karnataka, had the opportunity to meet Ravi Aluganti of Akshara, Madanapalle, at the conference on 'Alternatives in Education' at Bangalore and were fascinated by his work. They requested him to train teachers at Kuvempu on some of his activity-based methods. Ravi visited Kuvempu on Feb 8-9, 2003 and trained 8 teachers. The topics covered included introducing fractions, additions and subtraction using a *fraction kit*, sequencing of fractions, LCM, introducing shapes using the *shapes kit*, introducing 3 dimensional shapes by making models, the human skeleton model, making a chart with movable flaps explaining the main body organs and the systems. The teachers found the workshop extremely useful and felt that the various materials helped them understand the concepts better.

2 teachers from Kuvempu also visited Puvudham Learning Center (see report on Puvudham on page 3) for 5 days in June, 2003 to learn to make low cost teaching learning materials. They learnt to make alphabet sets, number rods (Cuisenaire rods), puzzles, material that can be used to explain place value concept better, and a few other materials which can be used for basic addition, subtraction exercises.

Kuvempu Trust members can be contacted at Kuvempu Mane, Opp. Chitradurga Gramin Bank, Shivaganga Post, Holalkere Taluk, Chitradurga District, Karnataka - 577526, prakashshiva@yahoo.com, Phone: 08191- 677316

Science Workshop

Viveka Tribal Center for Learning, Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, (SVYM) organized a two-day science workshop in April 2003, for teaching through observation and experimentation. The objective of the workshop was to promote science through hands on activities, relate science to daily life, and make science teaching more effective at the primary, middle & high school level. 24 people from about 10 different groups participated in this workshop. There were many activities like demonstrations of various simple experiments to show the properties of a magnet, Bernoulli's Principle, various properties of heat, internal combustion and the working of a motorcar. The participants also built models of atoms, saw the night sky and planets through the telescope, modeled houses and engaged themselves in various games. An extract from Ravi's report on this workshop:

"The next experiment Girish demonstrated was to show that hot air rises. He made a spiral with card and hung it in the center with a piece of string. Below the spiral he lit a candle. The spiral started to turn. He gave a piece of card to each participant and asked all of us to draw a spiral. He showed us an efficient way of drawing a spiral. Two pencils are tied to both ends of a piece of string. The point of one pencil is firmly held in the center of the card. Using the other pencil we draw a circle around the first pencil. We need to make sure the string gets wound around the first pencil. With each turn the string gets shorter and shorter which makes a perfect spiral."

Contact information: Mamata, SVYM, Hanchipura Road, Saragur, H. D. Kote taluk, Mysore district, Karnataka - 571121, vivekamysore@vsnl.com, Phone 0821-245412, 245413

Arts and Craft Workshop

Ravi Aluganti of Akshara, Madanapalle, and Chitra Krishnamurthy of Vikasana, Bangalore conducted four 3-day workshops for teachers on arts and crafts in schools in May, June and July 2003. They conducted one at Bangalore, two at Chennai and one at Timbaktu Collective. Each workshop had an attendance of around 17-20 teachers, with a combined attendance of 74 teachers from 16 groups from Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Pondicherry.

There were discussions on the importance and need for arts and craft in schools, the history of arts and craft, what art is, how, why and when art evolved, various activities that can be introduced to children, how these activities can be used to teach other academic subjects, classroom approaches while introducing these activities, age group for introducing activities, materials needed etc. The activities introduced included clay work, sewing, needle work, paper work, making some simple toys and painting. The feedback from the teachers was very



Clay modelling activity session in progress

encouraging. Some of the comments by the teachers:

"We have used only waste material but now we know that addition of small bits of colored paper and thread can make the objects utilitarian as well as presentable."

"When I came I did not know I will get this kind of training. I was expecting a training in lecture mode, writing and listening (without activity)"

"I have never been to such a workshop before. I thought that such workshops will cover only one topic, however here we learnt many activities and I am very happy about it."

- a participant

Most participants expressed the need to conduct this workshop in smaller groups, felt pressed for time and suggested a longer duration and more such workshops. Many teachers were doing such activities and learning how to introduce needle-work activities to children for the first time. Follow-ups are needed to ensure administrative support to introduce these activities, solve problems encountered by the teachers, also give feedback on ways in which the teachers are introducing these activities to the children and improvise and add on ideas for other possibilities/activities. Ravi and Chitra will be starting follow-up visits in September.

For more information contact:

Ravi Aluganti, c/o MORE, 5/357B, Appa Rao Thota, Madanapalle, AP-517325, ravi.aluganti@yahoo.com, 08571-228197
Chitra Krishnamurthy, 100 K.G.S Layout, Vijayanagar, Bangalore -

Education and Publication seminar

Tulika Publishers, Chennai, in association with the Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin USA, organized a seminar on education and children's books in India, on June 22-23, 2003 at Chennai for participants from University of Wisconsin, Madison for an overview of the challenges in educational and children's book publishing scenario in India. Presenters included Prof. Ashok Jhunjhunwala of IIT-Chennai, Prof. Ramanujam of TNSF, Dr V. Geetha of Tara Publishing, Deepa Balsavar and Deepa Hari of Avehi-Abacus, V. R. Devika, dancer and dance theorist and Radhika Menon of Tulika Publishers.

Radhika Menon talked about the scarcity of 'good' children's books due to an education system that does not demand the relevant content and in a market that does not demand good writing and illustrating for children. The Avehi Abacus presentation highlighted their Sangati kit and its goals to address issues related to the environment, communal harmony, gender and economic disparities.

"...there has been a realization that we need to move away from the British system of education, but the situation has not yet been addressed adequately as yet."

-Dr. V. Geetha

Participants were given a sampling of the kind of materials used, including a storytelling session using their large picture book. Prof. Ramanujam emphasized on the fact that the biggest failure of our curriculum is that it doesn't meet people's aspirations and the richness of knowledge, for example, of a Dalit, rural child, whose knowledge of life, nature and science around him/her has little to do with what he/she can find in books. For more details

contact: Radhika Menon, Tulika Publishers, 13 Prithvi Avenue, Abhiramapuram, Chennai - 600018, tulikabooks@vsnl.com, Phone: 044-4981639,4671117

LEARNING SPOTLIGHT

Here are some highlights of organizations interested in sharing their work, that were visited by the learning network members

Nirantar

Nirantar is a resource centre for Gender and Education. Nirantar defines education broadly as learning that enables women to take control over their lives. Education is a right that women have been denied for far too long. Information, for the most part, is not available in content areas relevant to women. Nor is it available in a form and manner that women can easily access. Also, information is not gender neutral. Nirantar believes that there is a need to produce reading/training material - for women and grassroots workers - that simplifies and demystifies information, and presents it with a gender perspective. Nirantar tries to develop new content areas, teaching-learning methodologies and activities that are grounded in women's lives and give space to their ways of learning.

Since 1994 Nirantar has been publishing Pitara, a bi-monthly Hindi magazine for readers with basic literacy skills. This includes both newly literate adult and grassroots workers. Pitara contains material that meets both information and entertainment needs of its target audience. It is gender informed and written for adults i.e. it is written simply but is not simplistic in content. Nirantar has developed a health education curriculum (in three volumes, Hindi) for grassroots facilitators. The material gives information and helps generate discussion on gender and health issues. Nirantar has also developed a Hindi language curriculum to help women strengthen their literacy skills and increase their understanding of gender issues.

For more information contact: Nirantar, B 64, Sarvodaya Enclave, 11nd floor, New Delhi 110017.

Puvidham

Puvidham Learning Center is a small and beautiful village school run by Meenakshi Umesh. The whole district of Dharmapuri is dry and drought prone. The school is remotely located and serves a good purpose for the poor in the area. Puvidham learning center was started in 1999 with 9 children. Currently this learning center has about 30 children in the age group of 2 – 12 years. The medium of instruction in the school is Tamil and English. The school believes that children learn most by engaging in hands on activities. The school does not follow a very structured timetable. Activities are sometimes guided by what the children are interested in learning that day. They have developed and made most of their teaching and learning



material. Learning aids such as puzzles, the Montessori material, cards, and many such materials have been made using local materials. The materials are all of very good quality. There is a lot of flexibility in how the materials are used by the teachers. They are very open to sharing the know-how to make the materials they currently have, using locally available materials and the way in which these can be used to make learning child friendly.

For more information contact: Meenakshi Umesh, Puvidham Learning Center, Nagarkoodalvill and post (Via) Indur, Dharmapuri 636803

Digantar

Digantar Shiksha Evam Khelkud Samiti provides quality education for underprivileged children in the outskirts of Jaipur for more than a decade. It currently runs 3 free schools for 460 children in this area. Digantar aims to help the child become an independent and motivated learner. Children should enjoy learning in an atmosphere free from fear, forced learning, forced discipline and competition. Self-learning and learning in cooperation with friends is stressed upon and each child learns at a pace he/she is comfortable with. There are no exams but rather a continuous evaluation by the teacher. Children are not split into homogenous classes but rather into groups based on their learning levels. There is a lot of importance given to arts and handicrafts in the school. This includes drawing, painting, clay modeling, carpentry, performing arts (dancing, singing), creative



writing and poetry. Digantar also has a very rich library, with subscriptions to many children's magazines and journals. Each school has its own reading corner where the teachers maintain books borrowed from the library. Over the years, they have developed curriculum material and workbooks for children up to the primary level. Digantar also publishes a journal Shiksha Vimarsh in Hindi, which is an attempt to create a discourse in educational theory and practice. Digantar has also provided teacher training to many government programs including the Lok Jumbish program and Janashala program.

For more information contact: Rohit Dhankar, Digantar, Todi Ramjanipura, Jagatpura, Jaipur – 302017

Announcements

Timbaktu Collective is organizing a 7 day **children's camp** at their center in the dussehra/diwali timeframe. The dates are yet to be finalized. This camp will be primarily for groups in Andhra Pradesh. If your group is interested, please contact Subba, timbaktu@vsnl.com, at Timbaktu Collective, Chennethipalli Post, Ananthpur, AP-515101 Food and accommodation will be covered. Interested groups need to take care of their travel. Limit of 10 children and one adult from each organization.

The **virtual resource center** is up and running at **www.learningnet-india.org**. We need your contributions via articles, activities, news, reports, analyses, experiences etc., to update the website with all relevant information. The website would be a database of interested groups, their areas of expertise, philosophies, and methodologies, and a resource center for sharing all relevant information.

The **January 2003, "Alternatives in Education" Banaglore conference proceedings** have been published. Please contact us for a copy of it, if you have not yet received it.

The Learning Network will hold its **next annual conference in February 2004 in Chennai**. Please contact us if you would like to participate in the conference, make a presentation or help us with organising the conference.

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If your organization has planned an activity that you would like to inform others, please send us an email and we will be happy to include it in this newsletter.

Learning Network

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