

MITHRA SCHOOL EVALUATION REPORT **(MARCH 2008)**

Evaluation Committee:

External members: were Anitha Cherian (Open Space, an NGO), Mark Sahayam (Retd. Head Teacher, an expert in education and author of several books on active methods of teaching), Sita Krishnamurthy (Principal, Deepika Alternative School), Latha (former teacher, Mithra School), Lawrence Fryer and Baerbel Grimm (Susila Dharma, Germany).

Internal evaluators were Fr. Jayanth Kumar (Mithra School), Mathew (Co-ordinator, Human Rights Education), Sr. Michaela (Retd. Principal, St. Anne's Convent), Manimegalai and Usha (Senior Teachers, Mithra School), Queenie, Bella and Joe (Mithra).

In addition to this a group of students and some of the parents were also involved in this evaluation.

Methodology: To complete this evaluation we had six meetings and the information was collected through discussions and personal interviews. Present students and the parents were met in batches.

The purpose: The purpose of this exercise was to assess the performance of Mithra School over the years and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school in order to improve it further and to take necessary remedial measures.

Background of Mithra School: Mithra Foundation started pre-schools for the slum children who otherwise would be engaged as child workers. Positive response of pre-schools both from parents and children compelled the organization to search for alternatives to provide ongoing education to children completing their pre-school. Enrolling them in government schools would ultimately lead to their becoming dropouts and private schools are beyond the means of many slum dwellers. It was with this background that Mithra School was started in 1999 to provide alternative and quality education for slum children.

The school started functioning from a small building at Muneshwarnagar with a small number of students and mostly unqualified teachers. Since the number was small, initially the teachers and students lived together in the school (like gurukulam). But as the years passed by, the number of students increased and the limited facilities (Insufficient toilets, lack of play ground, small class rooms, no benches) of Muneshwarnagar made it difficult to function properly. Often children used the adjacent road and open spaces as their toilet which was opposed by the neighbors.

The need for a proper school with adequate facilities and infrastructure was felt by all stake holders. Hence the new school building was constructed about two years ago to provide proper facilities of a formal school for slum children.

The school is recognized by the government of Karnataka (state syllabus) and this enables the students to get proper recognition. The medium of instruction in the school is English. There is the myth in the slums that English medium education is possible and affordable only for the elite class in society and not for people living in the slums. In the present situation unless the children learn English when they complete the school they cannot get a job. Unfortunately the government schools due to faulty language policy don't teach English.

Mithra Foundation was started with the aim and objective of empowerment of women and children. Empowerment of children starts with proper education. Hence Mithra School gives emphasis on child centered, creative, and active learning and quality education for the slum children.

Terms of Reference For the Evaluation:

- a. Alternativeness of the school
- b. Evidence of active and creative learning
- c. Standard of education of children
- d. Staff development, turnover and profile. (Qualification of teachers)
- e. Pre-Vocational skills.
- f. School Infrastructure
- g. Whether the school should go up to 10th standard?
- h. Sustainability of the school
- I. Interaction with the community
- j. Net-working with other groups

1. Alternativeness of Mithra School: This is a new venture to experiment and demonstrate that children from poor socio-economic background need an alternative approach to education to be effective. If such children are placed in a formal education system that is distanced from their reality, the drop out rate will be high. So Mithra started a model school with three basic ingredients, namely active and creative learning methods, basic and life skills approach, value-based education with academics. Mithra's commitment is long term and evolving an approach which embodies creative, active and holistic principles in the curriculum. The significance of a creative approach is being experimented with considerable success.

A childhood full of fun, activity and learning is what each child actually experiences at Mithra. Awareness, guidance, need-based services, quality education and a number of opportunities for holistic development are what Mithra provides for all children who enter here for learning. Active learning is a method and it was felt that over the years, the school has achieved this. Compared to the earlier years, children are active learners now and the teachers have acknowledged this fact with much satisfaction. This goes to the extent that the new teachers find hard to manage some of the classes.

The alternativeness also comes from the dalit and poor children feeling comfortable in a formal setting of learning. They feel secure and one with all the children in the class.

In an alternative method the role of teachers is sometimes only facilitation. The topic of the subject is introduced and the children teach one another. Quite a number of them are first generation learners. So peer group learning is more effective and productive.

Alternativeness also stresses on non-academic curriculum. Out of 8 sessions, two sessions per day is set apart for non-academic sessions. Twelve out of 40 sessions are assigned for extracurricular classes.

2. Evidence of active and creative learning:

- ❖ There are live projects for each class. Students have to produce / make models of what they have learnt in science, social, Environmental studies, and languages.
- ❖ Children are encouraged to create skit from their lessons, poems, etc. Teachers also facilitate role play of some lessons.
- ❖ The active learning is also from resources being made for the topics of the subjects, both by the students and the teachers. Resource mobilization starts from the time the teacher prepares her class in a document called “Notes of lesson” which contains teacher’s activity, students’ activity and materials / support prepared. Mostly they are made from the recycling materials.
- ❖ Participation in the class is also primarily the active learning method. The participatory and innovative methods of teaching and learning are the ways by which Mithra tries to implement active learning in the school. As a result of this teachers have discovered that children are more creative, having lots of ideas than the teachers themselves.
- ❖ Every Saturdays the school conducts inter-class competitions for 5th to 8th standard students such as debate, singing, elocution, essay writings, quiz programs etc. This enhances the student’s creative and active contribution to education of peer groups.
- ❖ The garden project and the various principles being adopted by them are the evidences of environmental learning. Prof. Aurora and Ms. Gangamma, herbalists, visit the school and give classes and demonstrations on gardens projects. Children are highly involved and interested in this venture.
- ❖ Teacher Kalam used to facilitate children in civics sense. Every Thursday children clean the campus within 10 to 20 minutes and secure awards for quick service.
- ❖ The sanitary project of Mithra School was another opportunity for the children to learn and teach to their parents how to make good use of the toilets. Good and healthy sanitary practices were taught to them and they in turn teach their family members especially to their younger brothers and sisters.

3. Standard of education of children:

For the assessment of the academic performance class works, home works, live projects, unit tests, monthly tests and periodical examinations are conducted. The question papers from two other schools run by private agencies and religious nuns were given to our students. It was observed by the teachers that the questions prepared by Mithra School were tougher. It was found that Mithra students performed with ease.

It must be admitted that in spoken English Mithra students still need to go a long way. This is an area which needs improvement. They are also rather weak in writing skills. Cursive (copy writing) writing is introduced as compulsory exercise in all three languages. It is still in the initial stage to make any assessment or impact.

Presently Mithra School library is well equipped with around 2000 books. It was rather weak in Kannada collections and this had been rectified in the year 2007. Though there are 3 journals available, the school needs to increase this up to 5 in the years to come. Library has a spacious hall with complete furniture for readings. The library has an attachment of reading rooms where teachers and students can sit and read quietly.

Once in a week there is compulsory reading class for students of class 4th to 8th. The class teacher accompanies the students for selection of books. The librarian ensures that children maintain silence and do serious reading.

The library facilities are utilized by taking books from the library and allowing the students do guided reading in their respective classes. This is practiced for class 1 to 3. As these children are too young, they have to be taught reading habits first before they can make use of the library.

4. Staff development, Qualification and sustainability of teachers:

Mithra offers regular trainings to the teachers. They are conducted three to four times a year for a period of 2 to 3 days duration. A team of external experts come for these programs. In addition to this whenever the resource persons visit the school half day workshops of specific topics are organized for the benefit of teachers.

Every other Saturdays are spent on in-service trainings of the teachers. It may be class preparation, discussion on specific class students or any other matter related to the school. Sharing of information, report writing on each student is also part of their trainings. Since Mithra School is an alternative school which is concerned about the total development of the child, these trainings have a lot of significance. The school is proud to have a team of committed and dedicated teachers, in spite of their limitations.

The teachers make good use of the library every day from 4 to 4.30 pm. This helps them to gain knowledge and to up-grade their teaching skills. Review of this exercise reports that it is very useful, though some of them want to miss this opportunity to meet their family commitments.

In the year 2007, internet facility was provided to the school for the benefit of teachers. They found it interesting and useful. Some of the teachers have decided to go for computer trainings during their summer holidays to make better use of internet facilities.

All the teachers of Mithra School are fairly well qualified. Out of 14 teachers, two are post-graduates with Science and Maths specialization. Three are graduates with Kannada, Economics and arts background. Two are qualified as Diploma in Education (D.Ed) and two are PPTT (pre-primary teachers training) and the rest are not qualified. It would be ideal to get committed, more qualified and experienced teachers. But such teachers demand very high salaries and other benefits. This is a constraint for Mithra School and it has to manage with medium qualified and fresh hands for the time being. In the years to come Mithra School will have to address this issue and find solution to improve the standard of the school further.

In the initial years, there used to be total turnover of staff. A maximum number of years the teachers remained in Mithra school used to be one year. But right now the average year of teachers staying with Mithra School is 3 years. Unless the teachers have social commitment to serve the poor children, they will not be happy in Mithra School. To find such teachers is very difficult. Since Mithra is not a profit making institution like other private schools, it is not possible to pay high

salaries and other perks to the teachers like in other private schools. It waters down to less salary and more work. Under such circumstances it is difficult to hold teachers. It was expressed that even other normal schools experience the same problem.

The members suggested that the teachers should be paid more salary and other benefits so that they will not switch over to other schools. Another reason for staff turnover is the remoteness of the school from other residential areas of the city and the facilities available in the area are rather limited. But this is true of any new school. Indications are that this problem will be solved in the near future when the area will get developed and buses will start to ply on these roads.

The out station teachers find it difficult to get proper accommodation and food arrangements to concentrate on teaching. If a good hostel is created, some out station teachers could be accommodated and retained.

Finding a good Head Teacher with social commitment and vision is a very difficult. Therefore, Mithra has formed a team of dedicated people to take the school forward. The team (Sr. Michaela, Manimegalai and Bella) consists of qualified head a teacher who takes care of the quality of education, senior teacher who takes care of social angle, creative and active learning methods and guiding principles of Mithra and a secretary who deals solely with all the administrative matters of both students and the teachers.

6.Pre- Vocational skills: The proximity of Vocational Skill Training Centre (VST) provides opportunities for students to acquire basic knowledge in certain skills. Spacious school compound and necessary infrastructure both at VST and the school, makes conducive for students to learn additional skills.

a. Tailoring: The students of VI to VIII are given the basics of tailoring on a regular basis. Some of them discover their special skills in this and continue to do more stitching during their free time.

b. Computers: Computer literacy is one of the subjects which students of class V to VIII have to learn. What makes it helpful is the availability of a number of computers for training. Mithra has internet facility in the school premise for the children to learn that too.

c. Automobile skills: Maintenance of the school bus is partly done by the students of 8th standard. The driver of the school is encouraged to involve the students of 8th standard while doing the essential maintenance work for the school bus. This helps them to learn some basics on automobiles. Some of the children are by very nature interested in such works. Cycles and other two wheelers are also made accessible for their learning.

d. House keeping: The common rooms like auditorium, library, art room, laboratory, kitchen, tool rooms, etc., are the places where students are taken to learn about the use of different articles. Teachers explain the purpose and the uses of each articles maintained there. They are encouraged to use them and place them back with proper documentation. Book keeping of all these rooms are also taught to the students.

7. School Infrastructure: Thanks to BMZ grant, Mithra has a proper school with adequate facilities. The school is comparable or even more superior to many well established schools in Bangalore in terms of facilities available.

The class rooms can easily accommodate 40 to 50 students in a class. The class rooms are of 14 feet height. The school has around 9375 sq ft of class rooms, around 4005 sq ft for walking space as verandah, around 7200 sq ft for common halls and rooms and around 3000 sq ft for storages.

A wide range of teaching materials are provided for the use of students and teachers. In addition to this, every week while submitting their lesson plan teachers are encouraged to produce some teaching aides themselves. This is to cultivate their skills in resource making and to learn innovative teaching methods.

The school has a good library, staff room, computer unit, auditorium, kitchen, Dinning hall, concrete basket ball court, ample space for play, parking space for vehicles and proper and separate toilets for boys and girls,

8. Whether the school should go up to 10th standard: The evaluation committee members unanimously felt that stopping the school with 8th standard will have detrimental effects in the students' academic career. All government schools are in Kannada medium and our students have their education in English medium. So they cannot join government schools. If they have to join private English medium schools, they have to pay high fees and it is beyond the means of slum dwellers. Minimum educational qualification expected these days is 10th standard. Even if the students want to go for any vocational training, the minimum educational qualification required is 10th standard. Considering all these facts it was felt that the school should go up to 10th standard.

In fact one entire floor of the school building is vacant which can be used to conduct classes for class 9 and 10.

9. Sustainability of the school: The evaluation committee was quite optimistic and felt that in the next 3 to 5 years the school can become sustainable without outside support. They suggested that the number of children who can afford to pay the fees be gradually increased so that from the fees that they pay, poor children can be supported. It is hoped that the hostel project will also bring income to support the school.

May be we can approach few companies to sponsor few more deserving students.

Already people feel that Mithra School is meant only for slum children. Due to this image, the middle class students avoid Mithra School. In the long run this image may not be helpful in terms of sustainability. Efforts must be made to change this image. Parents of children attending Mithra School are construction workers and their mothers work as domestic help. These parents are happy that their children are studying in Mithra School.

Mithra must increase the admissions and make them pay as much as they can. Intensive campaign to admit students from the general public is needed. Efforts should be made to remove the stigma that Mithra School is meant only for the poor slum children.

10. Interaction with the community: Since most of the students of Mithra School come from the slums where Mithra works, there are regular interactions between the parents and staff members. In addition to this there are also periodic meetings with the parents where problems are discussed and sorted out amicably. As a result, it must be admitted that there is greater awareness among the parents about the importance of education.

Being a registered charitable trust, Mithra initiated various programs in the slums freely. Hence people expect everything free at Mithra School as well. They expect free books, free uniforms, free shoes, free school bags, etc. This culture of getting everything free has to be changed. Now they are asked to contribute at least something and it is encouraging to note the positive change of attitude among many parents.

They also expect their children to speak in good English. This is rather difficult. Most of the posh private school children easily speak in English because their parents are well educated. The parents also take effort to speak to them in English whenever possible. But in the slum community, children speak too much of local languages and slang that forcing them to converse only in English is rather tough.

11. Net-working: The government has accorded recognition to Mithra School and it is part of the state level Private Schools Association called KUSHMA. They have regular meetings where they air problems and take up issues with the government.

As for Mithra Foundation, through Human Rights Education Program, Mithra is in contact with more than 200 schools in Karnataka. Mithra as an NGO is in contact with several NGOs at South India level. Mithra is also forming a network of South Indian NGOs to work on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Mithra also collaborates with other local NGOs whenever there is a local issue that needs attention and support.

There is a forum of alternative model schools numbering 11 in Bangalore City. Except two, all the rest are for the elite community. These schools used to have regular meetings and Mithra used to participate. Of late this has been discontinued. Needs to be revamped.

Recommendations:

- Students and parents should be motivated more and more.
- From 8th standard onwards admit as many students as possible from the general public. The school should go up to 10th grade by all means.
- Make intensive campaign and publicity for new admissions by displaying good banners giving photo of the school, facilities available, yoga, karate, computer and other courses offered.
- Provide better salaries and benefits to staff to prevent staff turnover.
- Students should avail the facilities of VST to the full extent to gain additional skills.
- Stigma that Mithra School is meant only for the slum children should be removed.
- Improve the functioning of the core team which would deal with the responsibilities of head teacher.
- Provide boarding and lodging facility to the staff, and a staff hostel, well furnished and convenient for out station teachers.
- Teachers with social consciousness should be recruited with good salary.
- Increase the number of students to at least 25 or 30 per class so that better salaries can be paid.
- Approach few companies to sponsor few more deserving students.
- Use the school bus to provide transport facilities for students and teachers at reasonable rates.

- Make the teachers to sign a bond for certain period of service. Ensure staff stability. Getting good teachers is not easy.

Dilemmas:

The alternative teaching methods are the uniqueness of Mithra School. But this often is compromised due to parent's pressure. Secondly the commitment of teachers to this vision needs to be strengthened and reinforced. Most of the qualified teachers feel secure in conventional methods.

The Mithra School believes in girls' education. Gender principles are being introduced. However the girls versus boys' ratio in many classes are rather bleak. This is because over the past years girls had been eliminated and the boys were preferred that whole sex ratio in the general population is altered. So Mithra School also reflects the same composition.

Mithra School needs more experienced and qualified teachers with high salary. The children who access the education are first generation learners. .

The original Goal is to start the school only for the poor that they would be freed from clutches of poverty. If the school has to cater to the poor, then it can not become fully self-sustainable. Poor can not pay fees. They can contribute some nominal amount for the education of their children. The amount being collected would be far from the real requirement. Mithra needs to strike a balance between sustainability and serving the downtrodden. The original aim of the school should not be lost.