

Note on Conference - ICPD - Chennai - September 1999

In September, we were invited to participate, by the International Commission for Peace and Development, at a conference on the Theory of Development. They required us to present a paper on education and society with specific reference to the work being done here and Primrose school at Pondicherry. The participants at the conference were to be from the UN, UNESCO, World Bank, and M S Swaminathan Research Foundation. It was presided by the President of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences - Mr Harlan Cleveland.

The ICPD has been one of our donors and has helped the school from its inception . They now wanted us to give a detail analysis of our work; and most important to show our techniques to discuss how they could be replicated; the possible educational and social changes that come about by it.

"To show the efficacy may be you bring Nirupama and a few other children with you ?" We were very wary. We had already exposed our children in another forum where the audience felt that may be the children had learnt 'by heart' 4 volumes of the World Book encyclopaedia! And that we were just passing them off as wonderful first generation readers! We had to do something different and yet something that the children could also handle. We were scheduled for the second morning session; the children were to be brought from the village that morning while Aruna and I were to attend the opening sessions too.

Aruna : I don't think I registered anything the first half of the first day. I was apprehensive; our children are great but would they 'perform'? The whole situation would be alien. A room, plush chairs, a round table, table cloth, mikes, only 3 brown faces other than us, different accents, and faces watching them intently. Were they, more than that, was I ready to take a test? As the participants talked one thing became apparent : that being so high up they were not going to put down the children. In all probability they would be sympathetic. By noon I had a strategy.

When the children walked into the conference room the next day, the reception was tremendous. There was a lot of shaking of hands, enquiries of names, ages; the participants said where they had come from and when the children showed signs of having heard of the places, there was a general appreciation. We began the meeting by introducing each child (there were 5) and what each one's forte was. We then asked the children to

go round the table and tell us how Roberts there were. There were 3 : Robert Van Harten, Robert Berg, and Robert MacFarlane. They also found 2 Walters - Stinton and Andersen. Then were asked a riddle : whose name if they read they would think of money. There was a John Banks in the group and they caught on immediately. Then whose name reminds them of the North Pole and ice and snow. Ice Berg or Robert Berg. They caught that too. By then the room was rooting for the kids. We then had a packet with a lot of nouns in them to be passed around. A word was to be picked and the children were to tell all that they could associate with that word. The words they drew were : UN, and chocolates. UN they associated with the World war 2, Kargil and Pakistan. Chocolates with children, milk, protein, energy, sweet, sugar, Denmark, jersey cows, Switzerland, watches, and money, mountains. We then had a demonstration of how language is taught, how spelling is learned as a by-product and we wound up with Nirupama reading her thoughts on ' World in the next millennium' (published in the young world of the HINDU).

The tea break had the delegates talking to the children and to my surprise they even answered in English. Only if the question posed required them to reveal feelings or thoughts they were hesitant. Then they would turn to a teacher and expect help. They were asked from simple questions like : do you really like chocolates (very much); have you seen snow (only in books); do you know where Hawaii is? (no) I took a plane from Hawaii to San Francisco in California (lots of grapes), to New York (statue of Liberty) to Frankfurt (silence) o, you don't know Frankfurt? It is in Germany, then to Madras. It took me 36 hours. (more than one day?) Where did you get your idea of one world (I read Asimov and I like his ideas) what else do you read? (o, in our school we are all compulsive readers, we read what ever we can. I also read ...)What do you want to do when you grow up (I want to be a doctor) Why? (lots of disease and people die).

It was beautiful. We watched our children having a great time; they handled cups and saucers, ate cookies and 'socialised'. The children returned after a lovely lunch and a special ice cream. That evening we had a lot of questions to answer. One which we are asked often : what will be the outcome of such an education and what will the children do when they grow up? We said that our aim was simple: if because of this education we can say that our children are in total harmony with themselves and with all they have to live with - that would be enough. If they go so far as to chair

such a conference that would be Grace. We cited, as an example, of their growth as persons the Gokulashtami celebrations . We had the 'matka' tied with all the goodies in it. When the matka was broken there was a general scramble. There was a lot of jostling and noise and laughter. Then almost as one the children gave the booties to the nearest teacher ' to be shared'. That's enough. We are happy.

The delegates visited Primrose school the next morning. There they saw children of the nursery and the LKG. They were very impressed by the performance. The children demonstrated the beginner stages of reading, basic sciences and geography. They also showed their familiarity with computers; their love for visual forms of teaching. The children kept clapping every time they were shown a card \ picture \ book they liked which amazed the delegates. They took with them a memory of children who were happy learning. We told them that that was the basic credence : the joy of learning is the greatest gift that one can give to a child; to learn always and everywhere.

Raghavan :

The outcome of all this? There were promises made to raise funds under the aegis of International Commission for Peace and Development to start a teacher's training institution, to raise funds for publishing the teaching materials that are being created in both the schools.

It was an exhilarating experience. Cut off as we are from realities (!) of the world outside, it has given us a fresh insight into our own work and how much we need to do if our children have to chair such a conference when their time comes. Suddenly it seems that the few years that they have with us are insufficient. We have begun the process of applying for a government approval as a self financing school so that our children can be with us until they are at least 12 years.

We are always aware in each of these forays we make into society that we have you, our donors, to thank. Without all your love and goodness that you share with our children we cannot do what we are doing. We thank you ; your joy in the work means so much to us. Our hearts are always filled when we think of you; words are - as always - a poor medium.