Vikasana Rural Centre for Education

Site Visit on Feb 1, 2014 by Shailesh Vaishnavi

Vikasana is being run by M.C. Malathi and follows David Horsburgh's teaching principles of learning through creative, activity based methods. This school was established in 1977 to impart quality education in a learner friendly environment with teachers acting as facilitators. Education is provided free to the children of surrounding villages.

The day of the site visit I reached the school location at 10am and was met by Deepa, a volunteer. M C Malathi arrived shortly and after briefing me about the school, she explained how the school ended up at the current location. She also told me about the difficulty they have faced in getting accepted by the community at the new place.

The school used to own a two acre space in Doddakallasandra off Kanakapura Road on the outskirts of Bangalore. The space was getting tough to maintain and protect from trespassers, so a little over a year ago the school decided to sell most of the land and retain a small portion for their use. However, they got coaxed into selling all of the land on paper, with some verbal agreement with the buyer to get back half an acre after reclassification of the land parcel, which he reneged on afterwards. Forced to leave the space, the school now operates out of a small space in Tataguni village about 6-7 kms further away from the old location. Children now have to take a public bus to reach the new school.

On entry through the gate, there is an asbestos covered open area, cutely done up, and used for playing, handicrafts, self-study, and for celebrating various festivals/events. Decorations from the christmas day celebration can be seen in the picture below.

Behind is a small dimly lit room with books, stationary and other items from the old school. A class for a small group was being conducted here by one teacher. After the introductions, I was treated to a beautiful Kannada song by the children here.

Adjacent to this room outside are two toilets – one for use by children and one for staff use (it had a key). The toilets are in fair condition, however no washbasins exist. The children wash up in the garden area outside about 30 feet away where a bucket of water is kept (picture below).

Across and to the right is a bigger, well lit room, also used by the community as a computer centre. This is used for morning assembly, physical exercise, and one to two group classes. I entered this room to find three groups of children engrossed in their activities: one had a class being conducted by the teacher, one was drawing unicorns on their own, and a third was doing some textbook exercises. All the children had a happy and confident demeanour, and were enjoying their time. I chatted with two boys, and they showed me their paintings with pride. Two girls I talked to said they loved the school – the only thing they missed was the nice space they had earlier with better resources.

The grounds outside have a small sand pit where I saw little children playing happily.

There is a small lawn cum garden area. I did not see it being used on the day of the visit.

A narrow stairway leads to the upper floor. It's in dire need of repair (a safety issue).

Upstairs there is a small kitchen used mainly by the staff, and an open area where children eat (and sometimes attend classes). Midday meal for the children comes from ISKON – the school pays 66000 INR on an annual basis and gets food delivered daily. On the day of the visit, the meal consisted of bisibelebhath (local dish made of rice, dal, vegetables and spices) and sweet pongal. The children came up here in batches and ate.

Observations:

1) There are 30 children attending the school. Attendance is top-notch, and the children project confidence and seem to enjoy the learning experience and the time spent at the school. They learn both in Kannada and English.
   Children are encouraged to appear for the mainstream 10th standard (grade) examinations and if they wish to, the school starts helping them with the preparations two years before the exams. Several children have done so and gone on to study further.
2) There are two teachers in addition to M C Malathi. One of them is a former student of hers, and the other from the local community. There also have a watchman from the local community to watch over the children and the premises. There is a part-time helper for kitchen, cleaning and miscellaneous tasks. A few part-time volunteers also help the school with various tasks.
3) Drinking water is brought to the school from a nearby community pump for daily consumption.

Concerns:

1) Current school premises have been offered for use free of charge by a well-wisher. However there is no official agreement, so it is unclear how long the arrangement will last.
2) Staircase needs repairs badly (this was pointed out by the school itself). RTE compliance also requires a separate toilet for boys & girls, so either a new one needs to be built, or the second one (for staff use) needs to be assigned for use by girls. Given the school does not own the premises or have an official long-term lease, it's not clear how it can make the much needed infrastructural improvements.
3) There is no playground on school premises. An adjacent empty parcel of land belonging to the nearby temple is currently used as a playground. However, the villagers seem to dump trash on it, requiring periodic cleaning. When I visited, there was some plastic trash scattered around the borders.
4) M C Malathi has not been keeping very good health lately and suffers from arthritis. At present there is no backup to take care of administrative tasks beyond the daily running of the school.
5) School needs to apply for its own FCRA certificate, instead of being dependent on Neel Baugh Trust.

Conclusion:

Vikasana is doing an excellent job educating the 30 or so children from the nearby communities, even with the limited resources it currently has. The children hold the school and the teachers in high regard, and love to come to learn in spite of needing to catch a bus to the new premises. The teaching methodology is very effective; the children look happy, exude confidence and can be seen learning on their own and with their peers without supervision or coercion.

Recommend the school be supported fully for their operating needs, but also recommend that the chapter discuss the concerns raised with the school in detail.