

# An unconventional classroom experience



**Sonika Lakhera**

Much like a gardener, a teacher too, must strive to provide all the right conditions  
for a delightful bloom...

Much like a gardener, a teacher too, must humbly accept that while she has an important role to  
play, the real magic, lies within the seed...

## Contents

<b>1. Preparing the soil</b>	<b>...1</b>
• Thinking through the work at hand	
• Building a shared understanding	
• Equipping the classroom	
<b>2. Planting the seeds</b>	<b>...4</b>
• Getting familiar with the RR	
• Clarifying work norms	
• Laying down work processes	
<b>3. Watching the seedlings take root</b>	<b>...7</b>
• Experiencing choice and accountability	
• Working with each other	
• Contributing to the classroom experience	
<b>4. Nurturing the young plants</b>	<b>...15</b>
• Ensuring rigour and reinforcement	
• Partnering children	
• Keeping things exciting	
• Collaborating with the Class Teachers	
• Maintaining classroom discipline	
<b>5. Enjoying the bloom</b>	<b>...27</b>
• Integrating domains of knowledge and skills	
• Initiating one's own work	
• Strengthening oneself from within	
• Gaining insight...a 'teacher' learns	

## 1. Preparing the soil

It was a quirk of fate...or, to put it another way...I just happened to be at the right place, at the right time.

I was working with Aseema, a non-profit organization dedicated towards providing effective educational opportunities to children from under-privileged backgrounds. I had just completed a year as a Standard 1 teacher...my very first year of trying to teach anyone, anything. I had been blessed with a wonderful co-teacher...we had worked hard and purposefully....tried different things....learnt a lot...and all in all, managed to create an engaging and stimulating classroom experience for the Standard 1 students. They in turn, had responded beautifully and proven themselves to be a bunch of bright, motivated and hard-working children, always eager for more...!

Aseema had been working with the Montessori approach at the Pre-primary level for a few years now. The children had responded positively, and the organization was now eager to introduce an activity-based learning approach inspired by the Montessori curriculum, at the Primary and Upper-primary levels as well. The objective was two-fold, one, to provide the children with an opportunity to master the concepts studied at the Primary and Upper-Primary levels through activity-based methods and second, to create a learning environment which would encourage the children to explore beyond the concepts they were so introduced to, in accordance with their own specific interest-areas. We wanted to enable the children to both, strengthen their foundations as well as, extend their learning into areas which they found most meaningful and appealing. We wanted to create a classroom where the children's work would not be limited by a pre-defined, time-bound curriculum but in fact, be fuelled by their own diverse interests. The belief was, that such an opportunity would lead to more purposeful, effective and long-lasting learning. This new kind-of classroom was to be called the 'Resource Room'. (RR)

Since I had had a good run as a Standard 1 teacher, and also since, in the organization's judgement I appeared to be someone who could take this work forward...the organization asked me if I would like to be the 'Resource Room Teacher' from the coming academic year.

### **Thinking through the work at hand...**

The 'Resource Room' was an unusual idea. Intuitively, we all knew that our children would benefit from a place like the RR...but, how were we to create such a unique learning environment? We knew we had the Elementary Montessori approach as our guide, but we also knew that we would have to practically design our own approach keeping our specific operational realities in mind. Despite this uncertainty, I felt quite curious and excited about the idea of the RR. From what I had come to understand about the Montessori approach so far, both at the Pre-primary and Primary level, the proposition of the RR sounded very interesting and so, I decided to accept the new role.

Luckily, I had a whole month of summer vacations ahead of me...and luckily again, my good friend Shalini, did me the greatest favour, by giving me a copy of 'Montessori Today' by Paula Polk Lillard. This book turned out to be my guiding light, as I set out to answer the million questions running through my head...What would we need to do in order to ensure that children were able to direct their own work effectively? What were some of the Elementary Montessori principles that we

should be trying to implement in the RR, how? Should the work in the RR be driven solely by the children, how would that really work?...

In addition to the questions related to one's overall approach, there were many operational issues to deal with...How should we link the work in the RR with the work that would be going on simultaneously in the children's regular classrooms? How many hours a week should the children spend in the RR? In what manner would the RR Teacher and the Class Teacher need to collaborate with each other to make this idea work?...

### **Building a shared understanding...**

I realized soon enough that I was not going to find the answers to all my questions right away. So, I decided to start by putting the basics together and getting all concerned on board. Clarifying the purpose and function of the RR seemed like a good place to begin. I put my thoughts down, secured the consensus of the key people and subsequently, had a discussion with the Class Teachers of Standards 5 and 6 about the same. We had decided to offer the daily RR hour only the two highest standards of our school – Standards 5 and 6, as the time-table did not allow for any more standards to be accommodated for the time being (the following year, we extended the RR to Standards 5, 6 and 7). We had also decided that the Class Teachers of the concerned standards would accompany the children to the RR, during their daily RR hour.

Together the Class Teachers and I, tried to understand how the children's work in the RR needed to be kept distinct from, and yet, closely related to the work in their regular classrooms. We spoke about how we could use the classroom time for introducing various subject-related concepts to the children and allow them to practice and explore beyond the same, during the RR hour. There were concerns about whether such an approach would be practical, whether the RR hour not interfere with the time required for completing the stated curricular requirements, whether the children could not undertake the further study of the basic concepts in their classrooms itself, thus eliminating the need for the RR...

We talked openly about each of these issues. We were all convinced that the children needed time to master the concepts taught in class and that they should be provided with the opportunities to take their learning forward in ways that were meaningful and interesting to them, irrespective of the stated curricular requirements. At the same time, we all had some valid concerns and apprehensions. After all, this was a departure for all of us. We were able to find satisfactory answers to some of our questions, and decided to tackle the others along the way. We all realised that we would need to collaborate very effectively in order to make this idea work for our children.

### **Equipping the RR...**

Simultaneously, I also set about equipping the RR with varied and appropriate teaching-learning material. We were given a substantial amount of Montessori equipment to start with. I started supplementing the same, wherever appropriate, with anything that I thought could be of value to the children...which as I soon realized, was practically everything that I saw around me! So, for example, we had a folder-full of pictures cut-out from different magazines and newspapers for various language activities like picture-talk or picture composition, newspaper advertisements of various supermarkets as also, playing cards and dice for math games, restaurant menu cards for

role-play activities, a collection of science experiments which could be carried out in class using very simple material, word games like 'Boggle' and 'Up words' and much more.

I tried to keep a few things in mind...that the material should be interesting, attractive and across a variety of subject-areas...that it should trigger different ideas and lend itself to be used in many different ways. So, for instance, while we had very few worksheets, we had a number of picture cards/information cards across a variety of topics...also, our chart-displays were designed to be used both as classroom displays and active reference material, and were therefore, regularly used by the children instead of lying inert on the soft boards.

The material was arranged in a simple and organised fashion across the classroom, with the understanding that the children would have complete access to it at all times. So, for instance, nothing on the shelves was off-bounds for the children, our classroom library cupboard was never locked and the children were free to come in during their recess and work with any material they wanted.

As time passed, I ceased to be the only one adding to the collection...our RR acquired far more enthusiastic and resourceful contributors...but, more about that later!

-----

## 2. Planting the seeds

The moment of truth arrived soon enough...in July 2012, actually. The RR was ready to start. I had thought things over, discussed various issues, and now it was time to begin the work...

The proof as the say, is always in the pudding, and the same was about to be served. Anytime now, the judges were expected to troop-in, ready to have a taste. And they were unlikely, to be anything but brutally honest...

### **Getting familiar with the RR...**

I think we began roughly, by me introducing myself...welcoming the children to class...and then asking them if they had heard anything about a new classroom in our school, called the 'RR'. There were a few half-murmurs and since no one appeared to have heard anything substantial, I proceeded to explain.

The RR, I began, was going to be a slightly different kind-of a classroom...that we were not going to have any lessons in this classroom, no text-books, no homework and no exams either. That the RR had been equipped with a variety of material, and that during the RR hour every day, they would be free to work with any material of their choice. That each one of them could take different materials or activities, and that I and their Class Teacher would be there to help them as and when required. And also, that from time to time, we would work in small groups, in order to familiarise ourselves with a new piece of work...

I then invited the children to walk around the RR and have a look at all the different kinds-of material placed on the shelves. This caused much excitement. The children explored the shelves eagerly, whispering and calling-out to each other in delight, whenever they noticed something interesting. After a while, we reassembled and talked about the various material that the children had noticed, and also about the manner in which all the material appeared to have been arranged on the shelves.

### **Clarifying the work norms...**

Now that all of us (meaning, I) were feeling much more at ease with our surroundings and each other...I proceeded to suggest some norms that we could all consider following while working in the RR.

We discussed the following points...

1. What will we do in the RR?
  - We will choose our own work.
  - We will work on different topics.
  - We will challenge ourselves.
  - We will ask questions.
  - We will look for answers.

## 2. How will we work in the RR?

- We will be regular.
- We will be punctual.
- We will take care of the RR.
- We will respect each other.
- We will help each other.

Each point was discussed thoroughly to understand the meaning and importance of the same. More importantly, we also talked about the behaviour we would need to demonstrate to fulfil these norms, for instance, what actions would we have to take in order to take care of the RR?...how would we have to behave with each other in order to be respectful?...what could be the various ways in which we could help each other?...and so on.

Once all the questions had been addressed and everyone felt comfortable accepting the work norms...we proceeded to prepare some charts displaying the same. The Standard 5 children prepared a chart on 'What will we do in the RR?' and the Standard 6 children prepared a chart on 'How will we work in the RR?' The children organized themselves into small groups and started to prepare separate strips of chart-paper, each carrying one work norm. Instead of simply writing the norm on the strip of chart-paper, the children constructed the relevant statement by cutting-off words or individual letters from old newspapers, and arranging them in the correct order. The children proceeded with the work very enthusiastically...and soon the classroom was ringing with their cries of "Give me a 't' now!".... "What comes after 'p-u' in 'punctual'?... "I can't find any 'k' anywhere!"...

### Laying down work processes...

Another important discussion that I had with the children within the first couple of days, had to do with the work processes that we would follow in the RR. There were not too many and I tried to keep them all very simple and logical.

For one, there was the 'Work Plan'. Each child was expected to prepare a 'Work Plan' for herself. The 'Work Plan' would extend across two weeks and list 3 specific tasks that the child would chose to undertake during those two weeks. Since all our children needed to strengthen their language and math skills, each child was requested to take one task pertaining to the English Language and another pertaining to Math. The child was of course, free to choose the specific activity (from those available on the shelves) which she would prefer to undertake in English or Math. The 3<sup>rd</sup> task could be from any other subject-area, as per the child's preference. Every child was expected to work accordingly to her chosen 'Work Plan' during the RR hour.

My role in this entire process was to simply encourage the children to explore the shelves freely before making their choices and answer any questions that they may have about the material. Since we wanted the children to direct their own learning, we obviously needed to give them the freedom to choose the work they wanted to engage with. The belief was, that the freedom to choose work that they truly found meaningful, would naturally awaken a deep sense of commitment and accountability amongst the children...which in turn, would make any learning that much more effective.



Another process that we proposed to follow, had to do with the preparation of the daily 'Journal'. Each child was expected to make a note of the task(s) she carried out, on a daily basis. We hoped that such a 'Journal' would not only help the children keep a record of their daily work but over time, also help them evaluate for themselves how well they were using their time in the RR.

We also decided to schedule 'One-on-one Discussions' between myself and each individual child, once every two weeks. The purpose of these discussions was for the child to go over the work that she had been engaged with during the last couple of weeks, clarify any doubts around the same and renew her 'Work Plan' for the coming two weeks. The discussions were also expected to give me an opportunity to understand how each child was progressing and anticipate the kind of support she may require from me in the coming few weeks.

-----

### 3. Watching the seedlings take root

#### Experiencing choice and accountability...

Getting to 'choose' their work, was a rather novel experience for the children. School, for them, was represented largely by a daily time-table which told them exactly what they would do at any given point in time during the day...when they would have history, when they would study math, when they would eat and when they would sing. During each such period/class, it was natural for them to spend most of their time working as per the common group instructions given out by the teacher, usually relating to the reading of a chapter or the completion of some writing exercises.

Quite understandably therefore, having the freedom to actually 'choose' the work that they would like to do at an individual level, while extremely inviting as an idea, felt rather strange in practice. I remember a child looking at me, back at the shelf and asking, "You mean I can take any work from here?" I could be wrong, but it felt as if, at one level, he was experiencing a delightful disbelief about being able to choose his work, and at another level, he was totally expecting me to come up with a few quick qualifications which would enable me to direct his choice, or rather, actually make it for him...

Some other children, simply picked up the very first activity material they laid their eyes on. They did not appear to take any serious efforts to look through the various material and arrive at a considered decision about what they would like to work with. Was it their excitement which made them hurry-up so with their 'choices', or was this just their way of dealing with a strange, unfamiliar expectation...?

Another common incidence was for a child to completely disregard her Work Plan, and take up some other work altogether. Most of the time, this happened whenever a new material suddenly caught the child's imagination, for instance, when she saw someone else working with a very interesting set of picture cards. To my understanding, such incidences seemed to be the direct result of one, the child not having spent enough time and thought while choosing her work in the first place, and second, a still-developing sense of internal focus and discipline towards one's work.

Another interesting feature, was the tearing sense of hurry that most children displayed while working through their Work Plans. To 'finish' a task seemed more important than the task itself. The 'Work Plan' seemed to be a race that they needed to rush through, preferably, before the stated review date. I remember discussing this issue with the children on numerous occasions... together, we tried to understand the difference between a job done 'well' and a job done 'fast'... we talked about why we had a time-frame for each Work Plan and whether we should be treating the end-date simply as a date for review or as a kind-of deadline...and, whether or not it was okay to continue with a task over the next Work Plan, in case the task needed that much more time to be completed in a thorough manner...

In addition to choosing the work they would like to do, the children were also given the opportunity to moderate the complexity of their chosen task. For instance, if a child chose to work with our collection of national flags...she could simply choose to draw out a flag and note down some key details about the concerned country, say, its capital city, its currency, its national language and so

on...or, she could draw the flag and decide to write an entire essay about the country covering its history, its culture, its economy etc.. There were no pre-determined ways of exploring any given piece of work...no fixed Q/As to be tackled...no set number of words to be memorised. The idea was to enable each child to design her work according to the level of challenge she was comfortable with.

As a practice, we really tried to keep the aspect of 'choice' alive in everything that we did in the RR. For instance, the children even had a choice about whether or not they would like to participate in the 'Silent Activity' at the beginning of the class ('Silent Activity' involved coming together as a group and sitting silently for a minute or two, before starting with the day's work), or about whether or not they would like to participate in a group project that some of us happened to be working on (such projects being termed as 'sign-up projects').

It was interesting to see how for some children, initially at least, making these 'choices' seemed to be simply about asserting themselves...there was just something so thrilling about that! Over time, they all started making their choices with more thought and deliberation. Some of them even started planning ahead, in terms of thinking about what work they would like to take-up in their next Work Plans. They became increasingly adept at giving shape to their work and most of them proved to be very good judges of their own capabilities, rarely shying away from challenging themselves effectively. Gradually, they started approaching their work with a greater sense of rigour and perfection. As expected, soon enough they started displaying a strong sense of control and ownership over their work. During our one-on-one discussions, for instance, they would speak very clearly and confidently about how their work was progressing and what they were planning to do next.

### **Working with each other...**

Initially, the Work Plans that the children created, were made on an individual basis...each child having her own unique Work Plan. There were times of course, when two or more children who may have chosen to do the same work, would decide to work together, but the initial choices were all made at an individual level. At the end of the first term of the 2012-13 academic year, the first year of the RR, we conducted a small survey with the children with regards to their experiences in the RR. Among the many things they let us know, they also told us, that they do not get enough opportunities to work with their friends in the RR. This feedback of theirs, prompted me to change the way we made our Work Plans. Now, we gave the children the freedom to form 'work groups' based on their own choice of partners (we teachers just laid down a guideline about the expected group-size), and then requested them to frame their Work Plans as a group. This meant that now, they had the option of choosing to do some work together in pairs or as a group and, at the same time, have the freedom to do some other tasks on an individual basis, if they so prefer. There were no pre-conditions...in a particular Work Plan, they could either choose to do all their work as a group, or some of it, or none at all...it was completely up to them.

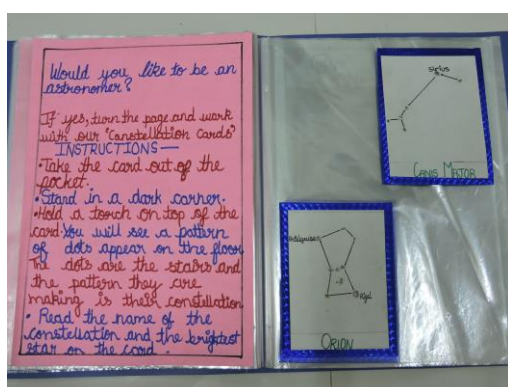
Watching the children go through this entire process of choosing their partners and settling-down as work groups, was a fantastic experience...! Not that everything was hunky-dory right from the word 'go'...there were surely some instances of children wanting to 'un-choose' a work partner, or internal disagreements with a work-group causing the work to falter or even come to a stand-still! But all in

all, the children found a way to work together...have their fights and resolve them too. I do not remember any incidence of any of us teachers, having to intervene on a really serious issue with regards any particular work-group.

The most beautiful part of course was watching them at work...watching them take up different responsibilities within their work-group, watching them guide each other and support each other...as only children can. They appeared to accept their individual differences rather naturally and without any serious judgement. It was understood that while someone was likely to have a better handwriting, someone else was likely to be better at drawing...that while someone was likely to find it easy to express herself during a class-presentation, someone else was likely to feel nervous. They had a way of supporting each other in a most subtle yet, effective manner...especially when it came to those children who were up against a real challenge. So there were times during an all-class project for instance, when one could feel the entire class experience a kind-of shared joy and pride, whenever one of them would go past a particularly challenging situation.

Having different work-groups in class did at times, lead the children to feel competitive against each other. What was amazing though, was the ease with which most children also give up that sense of competitiveness and help other work-groups, when necessary.

*Two groups of children were working on their respective group projects – ‘Constellations’ and ‘Dinosaurs’. Since the Term 2 exams and the term-closing dates were brought forward, the children were left with very little time to complete their projects. The ‘Constellations’ group was a larger group and had also completed a larger part of their work. The ‘Dinosaurs’ group on the other hand, was a smaller group and having started their project much later, had a larger part of their work unfinished. They set to work with great determination and, what was most beautiful was the way the children from the ‘Constellations’ group offered to help them out as well, after we had a little discussion about how it may be a good idea to do so. Ultimately, both the groups managed to complete their projects on time and we had two more beautiful projects to refer to in the Resource Room.*

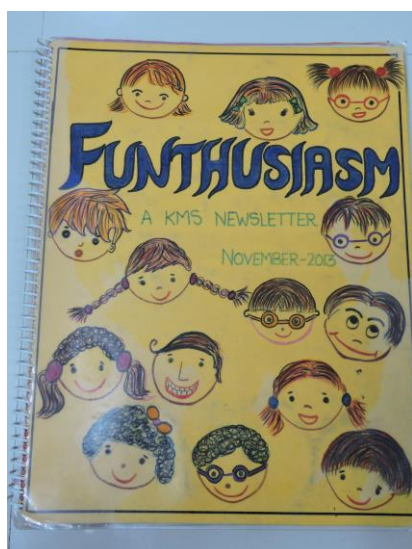


As time progressed, the children got a number of opportunities to work with each other, either within their work-groups or, all-together as a class. All of these experiences added to their understanding about what it takes to come together and complete a beautiful piece of work. In this respect, the most complex project that the children would have undertaken was probably the school's first-ever in-house newsletter 'Funthusiasm'. This project required the children of Standards

6A and 7A to work together in a highly collaborative and coordinated manner, and to maintain the focus and intensity of their work over a period of four months!

*The students of Std. 5A, 6A and 7A had been looking at newspapers and magazines a little more carefully, and learning about their different types and uses. In the process, they came across something special...the 'in-house newsletter'. This was something novel for the children and immediately caught their attention. Since our school did not have its own 'in-house newsletter'... we asked the students of Std. 6A and 7A, if they would like to create one for the school. They agreed immediately, and soon we had organized ourselves into 3 teams – 'the field-reporting team', 'the editorial team' and 'the design team'. The idea was to cover all the key events and activities held at school during that term, including festive celebrations, field-trips, school competitions, key class-room activities and so on.*

*Somewhere along the way, we talked about 'naming' the newsletter and after a completely democratic process of 'counting votes'... the children decided on 'Funthusiasm' (a home-made combination of 'fun' and 'enthusiasm')! As we went along, we kept on adding new elements to the newsletter for instance, a page each from every class-teacher covering a key activity conducted in their classroom, 'fun pages', 'editor's note', 'thank you page'...and so on. The children worked diligently. As the work progressed, they started understanding the importance of 'deadlines' and 'team-work'. They started becoming conscious of what it takes to produce an accurate and beautiful write-up. Words like 'field-reports', 'editing', 'designing', 'quotes'...became everyday vocabulary... we were functioning like a full-fledged 'publishing house'! Finally, on 28<sup>th</sup> November, the students launched 'Funthusiasm'! As expected, it was an instant hit...with both the teachers and the students eager to go through the colourful write-ups! It had taken four months of consistent work...and the students of Std. 6A and 7A had finally done it...they had published our first-ever in-house newsletter!*



The RR also provided the children (and us teachers as well!), with a very natural opportunity to learn from each other. Children learn very effectively by observing each other's work and the RR work environment, simply provided them with a greater opportunity to do so, and across a wider range of topics, given the sheer variety of work that could be going on in the RR at a given point in time.

Many a times, a child or a group of children also chose to present their work to the class. And at other times, something like 'Maps' happened....

*For a while now, Standard 5A had been itching for another 'sign-up project'. An opportunity came in the form of a project on 'Maps'. They were taken through the basic concepts related to 'maps' and given a practice on 'map reading'. After a while, we asked them if they would like to share their knowledge about maps with their 'seniors' - Standard 6A. The response was rather overwhelming...the 'sign-up project' landed up defying its own definition since the entire class 'signed-up' for it! And, we were off! The students prepared a simple presentation about 'maps' and 'map reading'. Like seasoned cartographers, they prepared beautiful and accurate hand-drawn maps of (imaginary!) places like, 'Mangopur Village' and 'Tedha-Medha Town'. They also wrote down specific questions with regards directions and distances, for each of their maps. On the d-day, March 15<sup>th</sup>, they 'taught' the students of Standard 6A, a little something about maps. They made an effective presentation and then they helped the Standard 6A students to do some 'map-reading'. In the process, we all learnt a lot that day...and not just about 'maps'. We realized that 'learning' can come from anywhere...even from our 'juniors'! We realized that 'sharing knowledge' actually helps us become more confident of our own learning! We realized that perhaps the greatest fun, lies in learning from each other...!*



### **Contributing to the classroom experience...**

One of the most fun and unusual aspects of the RR, was our ever-increasing collection of a wide variety of interesting objects! Although we teachers participated in the collection-drives as well, the more enthusiastic and productive contributors by far, were the children themselves! Sometimes, a collection-drive was triggered-off in connection with a new project...but mostly, it was just plain old curiosity which drove our efforts. Like the time when I happened to get a few stones to class, each different in its shape, colour and texture...and we got talking about the different kinds of stones and rocks we had seen in Mumbai, in our hometowns, at other places and so on. One thing lead to another, and somebody suggested that we try and collect as many different types of stones as we could. Within two days, we had a jar-full of beautiful stones in the RR...! Not that the collection-drive every really came to an end. Over time in fact, I had to also employ a tray to accommodate the new additions. It happened the same way with the bird-feathers, the seed-pods, the fruits, the flowers and the sea-shells...



All the projects that the children carried out in the RR, automatically added to our collection of display and/or referencing material, be it charts, books, models or anything else for that matter. At other times, children came and contributed their art-work to the RR...something done at school or even at home...something made by oneself or with the help of one's sibling or friend. Sometimes, the children added some activity-material to the RR shelves, like the time Rohit brought a hand-drawn, math-based board game to the RR...or, when Soni came and handed over a lovely picture story-book she had made at home with the help of her elder brother...or, when Chaitali came and showed us her magic bottle-dispenser...

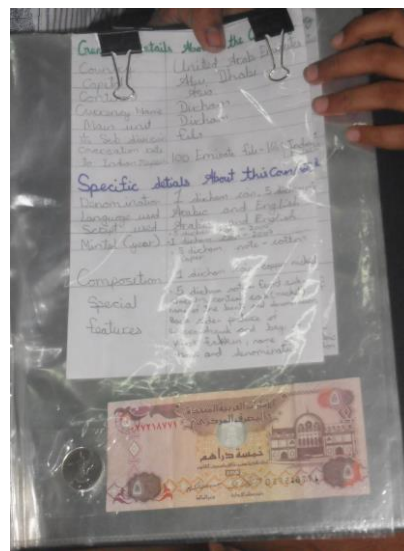
Sometimes, an unusual contribution led us towards a most delightful and educational project. Like in the case of the 'Coconut Tree Project'...

*It all started with a five-inch high coconut fruit which two children from Standard 6A – Kalpana and Sarita, happened to find on the roadside one day, on their way home. They rushed back to school, all excited about finding such a small coconut fruit, in which one could actually hear the coconut water splashing around inside! Very soon everyone in class was collecting coconut fruits in different sizes and in a matter of days, we had built quite a collection! From here, to doing a special project on the coconut tree, was but a small step and the children were totally game for it! The next few days were spent on learning about the parts of the coconut fruit, the germination process, the many uses of the coconut plant and so on. The children created beautiful charts using text and illustrations elaborating on these topics. They also collected (and created!) different objects made out of the various parts of the coconut tree. And of course, we had a beautiful collection of coconut fruits – all in varying sizes! The entire effort culminated with a class presentation for the children of Standards 5A and 7A and a day-long exhibition for all. The children of Std. 6A were on a high...higher than any coconut tree could take them!*



As also, in the case of the 'Currency Project'...

*It was just one of those amazing coincidences...three children from three different classes - Std. 5A, 6A and 7A, happened to bring in some foreign currency coins to the Resource Room, within a week or so of each other. This sparked off an interest in foreign currencies, and soon the students of Std. 7A as well as their teachers, were off collecting as many different foreign currency samples as possible! The collection grew steadily over the next few weeks...and soon the students had a brilliant collection of currencies from 27 different countries! 9 different individuals contributed to the collection, 2 of them being students of Standard 7A themselves! Along the way, the students also started learning a thing or two about currencies in general – the history of money, the main features of modern currency, the security measures used in currencies and some interesting facts about Indian currency. The 'currency folder' too, started taking its shape. The children started arranging the coins and banknotes in the folder along with their 'information labels'. These 'information labels' prepared by the students, provided important details about each coin/banknote for instance, the name of the country, the names of the main unit and the 1/100 sub-division, the conversion rate, the denomination, the composition, the year of minting, any special features and so on. On 15 October, the children presented their work to the students of Standard 6, sharing all they had learnt, in an interesting and effective manner. The 'currency folder' was a big hit...with all the students pouring over it in amazement and curiosity! Post the presentation, the 'currency folder' was rotated across all the classrooms so that all the children could enjoy looking at the various currencies. It took the students over a month to complete this project...and it proved to be completely worth the while!*



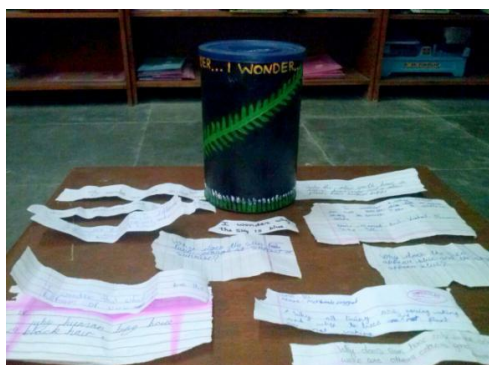
Simply put, we all operated with the understanding that anything interesting was welcome in the RR...and the children perceived their role as contributors, as both a right and a privilege...



*We had been collecting seed pods of different kinds and Priya brought something really interesting to class one day. We talked about it for a while, and I thanked her for bringing that unusual-looking seed pod to school. She looked straight at me and said, "Why 'thank you' teacher...this is my school also!" There really wasn't anything much left for me to say after that!*

And, it was not simply through their collections and their work that the children contributed to the creation of the RR...they also helped us run the RR in a more effective manner. The RR was a new idea...it was meant to be a place where the children could master a concept introduced to them in class through individual practice and then explore it further in a variety of ways and as per their specific interests. We needed to know if we were doing alright. So, half-way through the 2012-13 academic year, the first year of the RR, we conducted a simple feedback survey...asking the children for example, if they felt that they were learning new things in the RR, did they get to choose the work that they wanted to do, did they get to ask questions, did they get help when they needed it, did they get to share their ideas and opinions...and so on. The students were given a formal opportunity to voice their opinion on an issue which was of immense importance to them...their classroom experience. Their feedback helped us identify what we were doing right as well as what we needed to improve upon. It was the children's feedback on this survey which prompted us to form work-groups in class, and introduce new initiatives like the much-loved 'I Wonder Box', which helped children channelize their curiosity in a productive and effective manner...

*Since February 2013, the students of Standard 5A and 6A, have been playing 'scientists'! They have been trying to think about things which intrigue them and they have been trying to find the answers to those intriguing questions. Some of the questions they have been dealing with are, "Why is the sky blue?", "Why are human beings present only on earth?", "Why does the bird on the electric wire not get an electric shock?", "If our mind controls our bodies, then why do people do bad things?", "Why does the earth rotate?"... and so on. Clearly, both the teachers and the students are realizing that being a 'scientist' is not an easy job at all! Nevertheless, they are trotting along happily on this exciting journey and discovering new things every day!...All thanks to that deceptively simple-looking 'I wonder...box', where children put in their questions and then try to find the answers!*



## 4. Nurturing the young plants

### Ensuring rigor and reinforcement...

At the beginning of each term, we made it a point to set aside some time for discussing the work-norms that we had set for ourselves, when we started the RR. Although we did often land up referring to one or more of them as we worked together on a day-to-day basis, I somehow felt that a formal opportunity for reviewing the same would help reinforce the importance and relevance of these norms. We always held these discussions in a manner which encouraged us to think about whether or not these norms were helping us in our work, and how. Such a discussion, naturally helped all of us understand the significance of these norms and reaffirm our commitment to them.

From the very beginning, we made sure that all three of our work-processes – the Work Plan, the Journal and the One-on-one conversations, were followed sincerely and consistently. It was important to have this discipline in order to both, underline the importance of these processes and, to truly gain from them. Over time, the Work Plan evolved from being an ‘individual plan’ to a ‘group plan’, and as a consequence, the ‘One-on-one conversations’ changed to ‘Group Discussions’.

Both the Work Plan and the Journal helped the children develop a very real understanding of their work....and most importantly, helped them develop this understanding based on the objective reality that they represented and not the subjective judgement of a teacher. By reviewing these documents, they could judge for themselves, whether or not they had been working across various subject-areas, whether or not they were progressing at a reasonable pace and so on. In a subtle but effective way, these work-processes helped instil some very basic and critical work-values in the children...something that no amount of ‘lecturing’ would have ever done.

*Alok and the rest of his group members had been working on a writing-activity. They had each chosen a picture for themselves and were attempting to write a paragraph describing the same. We were all sitting around each other, and I was just reading through one of the pieces. Suddenly, I heard Alok say, “It’s been almost an hour now, and I have written only 4 sentences so far.” Alok had not said this out to anyone in particular, least of all me...he was just talking to himself. No one had told him anything about writing more...writing faster... not wasting time, or anything of the sort. This was just his own, spontaneous and honest observation of his work.*

The Group Discussions were conducted once every two weeks, one work-group at a time. Apart from renewing the Work Plan, I also used this time to carry out a quick review of the work that the children were doing. Since I tried to remain in touch with the children on a regular basis, there was rarely any need to discuss anything particularly new. The children typically used this opportunity to share any concerns or requests. For instance, they would ask me to explain a new piece of activity-material to them or, request for a more detailed discussion on the project they were working on or, ask for some specific material or information on a topic they wanted to know more about...

One more process that I tried to be rigorous about, was making regular notes and observations, about each child’s work in the RR. I tried out a couple of ways of doing so, and ultimately settled down to writing a simple paragraph about each child, every two weeks. I used these notes to record

a variety of things...any specific work patterns that I may have observed in the child, any concerns, any highlights, any key comments made by the child about her own work, any ideas around what I could do better, and so on. These notes gave me the opportunity to think about each individual child...think about how she was doing...and what more could be done to help her progress effectively. They helped me become more observant of each child, to give more effective feedback and to also modify my own approach as necessary, while I worked with the children.

*Maintaining neatness in his work was a challenge for Rohit. We had spoken about this many a times, and although on every such occasion, he always agreed to pay more attention to this aspect of his work, nothing much was really changing. He continued to draw lines free-hand even though they came out all askew, continued to use a blunt pencil and let his writing wander all over even though it made his writing incomprehensible, continued to flip through the pages of his notebook roughly even though they got all crumpled-up in the process...Somehow, it appeared as if he had not really found any reason to be 'neat' at his work so far. I had realised by now, that merely talking about this issue again was unlikely to make much of a difference. But, what if Rohit were to find himself engaged with a kind-of work which demanded 'neatness' almost as a pre-requisite for its successful completion?*

*An opportunity came soon enough. Rohit and Aneesh had been working with polygonal shapes for a while...and had acquired a good understanding of their names and basic features. I now asked them if they would like to make a chart-display about the different polygonal shapes for their classroom...pointing out, that this would enable them to help their classmates learn about polygons as well. Now, Rohit was someone who used to find himself in trouble with his teachers and classmates, fairly frequently, for a variety of reasons. The prospect of making a chart-display for his class, on the other hand, presented itself as an opportunity to engage positively with his classmates and his class teacher. Rohit and Aneesh set to work. It was a first for both of them and as they progressed, we talked about how we should design the charts...where should we put the drawings and the text and so on. More importantly, we looked at some of the charts that were on display in the RR and talked about what was nice about the way those charts had been made...so, we talked about the straight lines on the border, the beautiful handwriting, the even colouring, the absence of any smudges or cracks on the chart-paper and so on. We discussed how all these elements made the chart attractive and easy to understand. We also talked about how perhaps, we too should try to make our chart look the same way...nice and beautiful.*

*Did Rohit's and Aneesh's chart-display ultimately match the aesthetics of our RR chart...not really! Did their motivation to do something useful and beautiful for their class motivate them enough to do their best...yes! Did they feel good about their effort when their chart was finally put up on their class room soft-board...yes! Will this experience encourage Rohit to value neatness and beauty in his work...we will have to wait and see. But, that he made his most sincere effort and enjoyed the entire experience....is beyond doubt!*

### Partnering the children...

Although it was the children who decided on what work they would take up as part of their Work Plans, initially they were times when I had to actively make some suggestions about the kind-of material a child could work with. This happened largely I think because the children took some time to familiarize themselves with the different kinds of things available in the RR, and also because some of them took time to feel confident about making their choices. Of course, all of this changed fairly fast. It was only a matter of time before the RR stopped being 'sufficiently equipped' to cater to the children's diverse and ever-growing areas of interests. Very soon, the children were embarking on explorations which were unfamiliar to us teachers as well, and for which we often did not have any specific reference material to start with, like in the case of some 'I wonder box' questions or, when Vinay wanted to learn how to make a robot! Not that this situation deterred anybody...it just meant that we had to look for some new sources of information and guidance...like the internet or a resource person. For instance, once we took the help of some carpenters who were working in our school to understand how wooden chairs are made, and at another time, we got a young IIT-trained engineer Mr. Sushil Shintre, to help us understand a little something about electricity.



Somewhere, all this searching...also helped establish that no one person or one book has all the information that we may need...that therefore, the important thing was not to know everything ourselves...but to have the ability to find-out what we needed to know. I considered it my responsibility to locate and gain access to various sources of knowledge and information...but I never really worked alone, the children tried as well...like the time a child's mother helped us identify the name of a funny-looking fruit which none of us had ever seen before or, when another child's mother happily donated her young coconut plant to our 'Coconut Tree Project' exhibition...!

Another key element that we were required to pay attention to, was the children's own expectations from their work. Like I mentioned earlier, quite often, 'finishing' a task seemed to be the only thing to do...the children appeared to pay little attention to 'how well' a task had been done...and what they had really gained from it. So, for instance, if a child chose to write about a particular bird, say, the peacock, she would be totally satisfied with simply copying out a paragraph about the peacock from a book, without making any attempts to understand what was written or, to think actively about it or, to try and write the same information in her own words. Many children

appeared to pay little attention to how neatly they presented their work, how imaginatively they approached their work, how deeply they researched out their topic, or even how well they understood what they had done. Their still-developing reading and writing skills seemed to be only part of the reason...somehow it appeared as if the children were not experiencing any real engagement with their work.

The fact that in the RR, the children were not compelled to read any particular chapter or do any particular worksheet...that they were free to take the work of their choice, helped in getting them more purposefully engaged with their work. And yet, it took the children a substantial amount of time and effort to break through the existing patterns of thinking and to learn to have greater expectations from their work, and in effect from themselves. It required a variety of efforts...having persuasive, even tough conversations, consciously demonstrating specific skills, keeping patience with slow but, steady progress, consistently urging children to put in their best efforts...and, very importantly, committing myself to the very same standards in my own work. It took the children some time to understand the kind-of expectations I was laying down at work and the reasons why I was doing so. Slowly, I think, they started internalising what felt right to them and started making genuine efforts to meet the new and raised standards of performance. The fact that fairly early on, we had some very enjoyable and productive work experiences together by way of some class-projects, definitely helped. It enabled the children to realise what was possible if we approached our work with some thought, imagination and focussed effort. Slowly and steadily, the children continued to progress. For instance, initially I had to select books for them to refer to while they worked on some topic, as time went on however, they started to look for relevant reference material on their own...initially, the children found it challenging to rewrite even a small paragraph in their own words, slowly, they started composing their own texts by referring to more than one sources of information...

*Kashish and a few other students of her class had chosen to study 'volcanoes' as part of their work-plans. We had had a discussion around the topic of 'volcanoes' and the children had generated a list of questions that they wanted to find answers to. The questions had been divided between the children, and each child was given the responsibility to research her question and write an answer for the same. It was also made clear, that we would not 'copy' from any book, but instead try and write the answer in our own words after collecting information from various sources. A few days later, we sat down to discuss one of the questions which the children had been working on. As we read through the answer the children had written, and looked through the 2 -3 books which had information on that specific question, it started becoming apparent that some vital information had been missed out...and that the entire answer, could perhaps be structured in a different way. As we continued to discuss, Kashish spoke up very confidently and said, "Teacher, I should first write this part, then this and then this..." pointing to the different sections of the books that we were referring to. That she had sequenced her answer appropriately was a joy in itself....but what was really wonderful, was the confidence and capability she had displayed while 'thinking about' and 'structuring' her answer to make it more logical and comprehensive. Somewhere inside her, she was building the ability to express herself in a clear and precise manner.*

Not that this teacher-student 'partnering' was ever a one-way affair. Apart from the millions of times that the children would have knowingly or unknowingly, given me feedback on how things were progressing in the RR....I remember at least two instances of receiving absolutely direct, accurate and personal feedback from the children...

*The children were still trooping into the RR and settling down for the 'Silent Activity', when suddenly Moiz, who was sitting right next to me said, "Teacher, look at your nails...they are big...you should cut them...they will get dirty....then how will you eat your food?"....Obviously, he was holding me to the same standards to which he himself was regularly held accountable to...and why not? I looked at him sheepishly...admitted my mistake, and assured him that I would trim my nails the very same day. From that day onwards, whenever my nails need trimming, I am reminded of Moiz, and find myself reaching out for the nail-cutter without delay!*

*Anita, Jaya and Swati were sitting around me, just getting started with their day's work. Suddenly, one of them said, "Sonika Teacher is in a good mood in the mornings". The others nodded their head in agreement, and then someone added, "You scold us when you are angry about something..." All of them, and I myself, burst out laughing! Both their observations were absolutely right...they had caught me! The more amazing thing I guess, was the manner in which these observations were shared...spontaneous, addressed to me directly but also as if, being discussed amongst them at the same time...*

### **Keeping things exciting...**

Just like the children, I was forever on the look-out for sharing something interesting in class. It could be a newspaper report on an exciting scientific discovery or, some unusual pictures or, an interesting book...anything that I thought would attract the children's attention and make them wonder about things. We made a conscious attempt to keep ourselves abreast with what was happening around us...any key events or happenings in our city, our country or around the world. Going over the daily newspaper, was as much about feeling connected with the world around us, as about improving our language skills. Quite often, our endeavours would lead to us to some great learning opportunities...like in the case of the 2012 Olympic Games...

*I do not quite remember how it all started...but somebody, for some reason, mentioned the 'Olympics'. The 2012 London Olympics after all, were just around the corner. As we continued our discussion, I realized, that most of the children were completely unaware of what the Olympic Games were all about. Obviously, here was something that needed to be corrected. So over the next couple of weeks, we started building our understanding about the Olympic Games, their origin, their significance, the number and kind of sporting events they had, the number of countries which participated, the Olympic flag, the Olympic motto....basically, we tried to learn as much as we could. The children enjoyed it thoroughly...it was as if, a whole new world opened up for them. For the first time, they learnt about games like rowing, archery, fencing, diving...and, about champions like Michael Phelps and Mary Kom. And, quite honestly, all they needed was just the slightest trigger....and soon they were the ones telling me about the latest Olympic headlines! As the games unfolded, we started keeping track of India's medal tally...how many golds, how many silvers, how many bronzes...in which event...by whom...?! The children also prepared a lovely chart-display using different pictures to bring out the significance and glory of the greatest sporting event in the world....suddenly, the Olympic Games did not seem so unfamiliar after all!*

Just like there were no specific parameters about 'what' we would be exploring in the RR, there were none for the 'how' part either. So, we landed up working in many different ways...individually, in pairs or in groups...we would work with Montessori material or other kinds-of activity material...we would have group discussions, quizzes, experiments, games, presentations, story/poetry readings, projects, exhibitions, guest sessions...

Once, we had a music quiz...

*The students of Standard 5A and 6A ended the first term on a high and 'musical' note! Our 'Music Sir' conducted a 'Music Quiz' on the last 'Resource Room' class of Term 1. The quiz aimed to familiarize the children with various aspects of music – identification of instruments through pictures or sounds, identification of key personalities associated with the field of music, identification of a familiar song etc.. The quiz was a 'blast' in more ways than one...at the end of the last 'buzzer' round, no one really knew which team got the most answers! The beauty of course was that by then, nobody was really worried about that anyway!*

And, even a shadow puppet show...

*A science experiment on light and shadows, and a Panchtantra story read out in class...two completely different experiences gave rise to a whole new idea – a 'shadow puppet show'! Standard 6A suddenly had a class-project on hand and they were raring to go! Puppets, screen, dialogues and songs...everything was put in place, and after some rigorous practice, on 11<sup>th</sup> February the students were ready with their performance. All the students from Standard 1 through Standard 5 came to see the show and as expected, it was a tremendous hit! In fact, it actually inspired some Standard 4 students to conduct their own little 'shadow puppet show' for their friends! Last heard, Standard 3 too was planning their own show. A simple idea... had become a rage!*



We also took specific efforts towards strengthening our children's awareness and understanding about various work contexts. In line with the same, from time to time, we held special 'career awareness sessions' in the RR on a variety of areas, for instance, engineering, sports and fitness, commercial art and photography.



What added to the general sense of excitement was the active and consistent participation of the other teachers and staff-members in the various activities of the RR. Whether it was about helping with some aspect of a class presentation or giving feedback to the children during their practice sessions...we never fell short of any helping hands or minds! The entire staff, teachers, social-workers, administrative personnel, school helpers...took a keen interest in the children's work – they attended their presentations, looked through their projects, interacted with the children so as to help them think more deeply about their work and gave them their most heartfelt feedback. I have no doubt, that all of this contributed towards making the children feel good about their work and encouraged them to consistently put their best foot forward.



In effect therefore, there never really was a dull moment in the RR...things were somehow always active and alive. Whenever somebody visited us after a while and asked "So...what's new?", we always did have a couple of things to share!

### **Maintaining classroom discipline...**

In a regular classroom, most of the children would normally be occupied with the same task, either reading something as a group or, doing some writing work as a group or, discussing something as a group. Even if they were working in smaller groups, there would rarely be more than 3-4 groups in any classroom, and the children belonging to each group would again be engaged in the same activity. In the RR however, we would usually have about 2-3 work-groups working on different topics, some pairs or triads of children working on something else, and a bunch of children doing their own work, individually. One most days therefore, it was quite impossible for just 2 teachers (that how many teachers we always had for a class of about 28 children) to attend to all or even most of the children, at the same time. Potentially, this could lead to a chaotic classroom situation. However, it rarely did.

I had had the good fortune of hearing one of our senior teachers Sajitha, talk about the issue of classroom management once, much before I got to work in the RR. Sajitha is an experienced and wise teacher, and when she spoke about this very contentious issue of classroom management, you knew that she had thought deeply about it and experienced its complexities first-hand. She suggested we look at the issue of 'classroom management' not from the teacher's perspective, but from the child's perspective instead. If and when a child comes to believe (she said), that by not engaging effectively with the classroom activities, she stands to lose out on something valuable,



she will instinctively not do so. No outside threat or temptation would be necessary. So in effect, our job as teachers, was to create those conditions in the classroom, which encouraged the child to think in this manner. We would not need to do much else.

Another perspective that I had had the opportunity of listening to at a seminar organised by the 'American School of Bombay', on this rather problematic topic of 'classroom management', suggested, that the keys to an engaged and productive classroom environment, were the three elements of choice, competence and community. The argument was, that if the children were given a choice with regards to their work-related experiences in the classroom, if they felt competent and secure about handling the expectations related to their work, and if there existed a strong sense of community amongst the members of the classroom...things would take care of themselves. No external system of rules and consequences would be necessary to create a productive classroom experience.

Much of this and Sajitha's perspective, was in line with the Montessori approach on the issue of student freedom and discipline as well. My own instinct and experience told me the same. The key seemed to be the creation of an environment which facilitated, within each child, a strong sense of engagement with his work. If such an environment was successfully established, there were unlikely to be any significant disciplinary issues to deal with in the first place.

Primarily speaking, children appear to disengage with their work most often, when they are forced to do something they do not find interesting or relevant or, when they are forced to complete a task which is way beyond their capabilities (choice and competence). We tried very hard to make sure that the children never had to face either of the situations in the RR, by giving them the opportunity to both, choose the work they wanted to do and to also moderate its complexity. Very importantly, we never saw a child using this flexibility in a way which undermined her capabilities or lowered the quality of her work.

It was little wonder therefore, that even those children who usually found it difficult to work effectively in a regular classroom (principally because they were behind in their basic language and math skills as compared to their classmates) and who therefore often got into some kind of trouble or another, worked quite well in the RR. Here, they had a far wider range of work to choose from and more importantly, the freedom to decide not just 'what' they would do, but also 'how' they would do it.

In fact, I always look back at this moment rather fondly, whenever I think about the issue of 'classroom management' and 'student engagement'...

*Anoop and Salil, from Standard 6, are currently developing their basic reading and writing skills. Because of this, at times they tend to shy away from any work that may involve a higher level of reading and writing than what they are currently prepared for. This in turn, causes them to feel disengaged with their class-work rather easily, and as a result, they quite often find themselves in trouble with their teachers. None of this means that they are not interested in reading or writing, however.*

*Recently, Standard 6 was working on the 'coconut project' in the RR, and Anoop and Salil got the opportunity to prepare a chart on the 'nutritional value of coconuts'. Though the chart involved reading and writing some difficult words, they did the work most enthusiastically with the teachers' guidance. They also got the chance to prepare some of the display material for the project exhibition. In effect therefore, they engaged with the class-project completely and contributed to it as effectively as any other child in class. One day, around this time, both of them came to the Resource Room and said that they wanted to draw and write about the coconut tree, using a reference chart which had been put up on the soft-board. This work was not a requirement for the project...it was just something they had decided to do on their own. When I asked them if they were not having any other class at that time, they said that it was actually their 'Sports period' but that they wanted to do this work instead. Now, both Anoop and Salil enjoy sports heartily, so I was rather amazed to see their willingness to trade 'sports' for 'writing'! Upon probing some more, I realized that our Sports Teacher was conducting fitness exercises in class that day and these two boys didn't seem to be very interested in that. More importantly, they seemed to be greatly motivated to work on the 'coconut tree chart'. They had come prepared with their books and pencils; absolutely clear and determined about what they wanted to do. Their motivation was just too precious to tamper with. So, I requested our Sports Teacher if they could stay in the Resource Room for a while and do their work. Having understood the situation completely, our Sports Teacher agreed, and the boys stayed back in the Resource Room for a good 30 odd minutes...working silently, not disturbing anyone else, and leaving only when they had completed their work. It was just one of those moments!*

The difficulty of attending to the diverse needs of the children, of course remained. However, this difficulty too, actually turned out to be rather a blessing in disguise. The children understood soon enough, that given the way we worked in the RR, it was not going to be possible for the teachers to attend all of their questions and requests, all at the same time. So, over time, they learnt to do two things...one, they learnt to work more independently and depend upon their own judgement about their work, instead of constantly seeking affirmation from their teachers...and two, when they really needed help, they learnt to wait for their turn, patiently and respectfully. Both, in my view, very important learnings, which should hold them in good stead, on very many occasions.

### **Collaborating with the Class Teachers...**

One of the key purposes of the RR, was to provide the children, with the time and space necessary to master the concepts being introduced to them in their classrooms, and encourage them to go beyond the same. In order to do so, it was necessary to find a way to keep the work in the RR, linked closely with what was happening in the children's classrooms. And consequently therefore, it was

necessary for me to keep myself abreast of the work that was happening the children's classroom, at all times. This would allow me, for instance, to introduce activities/material, which related to what the children were working on in class, in order to reinforce or extend their learning.

The concerned Class Teachers and I, formulated a simple system to ensure a strong-link between the classroom and the RR activities. At the beginning of the academic term, the Class Teachers planned out for themselves, which topics they would take up in class on a month-on-month basis. They passed on this information to me, so that I too, could plan out my work accordingly. At the end of each month, the Class Teachers would update me on which of the planned topics had been introduced in class, and which, if any, had been rescheduled. Over the next month, thereafter, I would introduce some activities or material in the RR, which would help strengthen and further develop the children's understanding of the concepts which had been introduced to them in their classrooms, during the previous month.

Sometimes the activities would help clarify or reinforce what was being taught in class. For instance, when the children were learning about the layers of the earth and the movement of continents over the ages, we brought boiled eggs to the RR and tried to understand how the different layers of the earth were arranged one on top of another, much like the yolk, egg-white and the egg-shell...and, we also did a little jigsaw activity to figure out how a long time ago, the different continents possibly stuck together to form the 'Pangea'. Or, when the children were learning about different polygonal shapes in class, we did a small activity which required them to make any design or a landscape, using different polygonal shapes and then identify how many different types they had used.

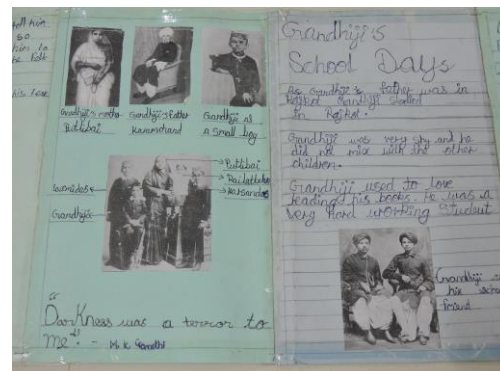
Other times, the activities enabled the children to build on their learning. For example, when the children were learning about the human body organs and organ systems in their class, in the RR, they were introduced to a material which enabled them to label the different parts of an organ or organ system correctly, read some fairly detailed information on how each organ or organ-system worked (the details provided here, were an extension of what they were reading in their text-books) and even try to solve a quiz or a word search, based on what they had read. Similarly, when they were learning about the Indus Valley Civilization in class, the children used their RR hours to make a giant brochure elaborating on the Indus Valley Civilization, adding more information through text and pictures, than what their text-books had provided them with...

*In October 2013, the students of Standard 6A, prepared a 'giant' brochure on the 'Indus Valley Civilization' inviting an imaginary audience to a tour of the ancient world! The brochure covered a host of details about the lives of the people who lived in the cities of the Indus Valley civilization. For instance, the brochure talked about their architecture, their arts and crafts, their occupations, their clothing etc.. The brochure also gave details about the various archaeological explorations that have been carried out in the Indus river valley over the years. All of these wonderful details were presented with the help of colourful text, maps and photographs. The students presented the brochure to all the students at school. Apart from helping them learn a whole lot about the exciting world of the ancient people of the Indus Valley, this experience also helped children hone their research, writing and presentation skills.*



In much the same way, while learning about the Indian Freedom Struggle and Mahatma Gandhi, during their history classes, the children carried out a lovely project which helped them build on their existing knowledge of Gandhiji's life...

*On the occasion of 'Gandhi Jayanti' the students of Standard 5A, created a time-line of Mahatma Gandhi's life. The timeline covered Gandhiji's entire life-time and touched upon the key events of his life in South Africa and India. The time-line included text as well as pictures and when complete, it ran across the entire length of the classroom! The children presented the time-line to all the other children in school. This project was important in more than one ways for our children. Not only did it give the children a chance to learn more about Gandhiji's life, but it also enabled the children to gain more confidence in their own skills and abilities. It was clearly a highlight of the term! One student had a very insightful remark to make after looking at the length of Gandhiji's time-line, "He did so many things in his life?!...and we have covered only some of them?!"*



Apart from coordinating the activities of the classrooms and the RR in an efficient manner, the Class Teachers and I also needed to collaborate very effectively while working with the children in the RR. Attending to 25-odd children, almost all of them working on very different topics, could get very demanding. More than that, being on the same page, as far as the overall work-approach was concerned, was of utmost importance. It had to be a shared commitment, or else we were sure to falter. Thankfully, we never found ourselves in any conflicting situation...through it all, we stood by each other, rock-steady.

I am certain that the children would not have achieved half of what they did, had the Class Teachers not committed themselves to the idea of the RR. It was their unstinted support and encouragement which kept things moving in the RR...their guidance and suggestions which helped me effectively moderate the work in the RR. Had they not been there partner me through this marvellous adventure...I am sure I would have had a very different story to tell.

-----

## 5. Enjoying the bloom

### Integrating domains of knowledge and skill...

Although the material kept on the shelves of the RR, had been organized according to the subjects the material most closely related to, when the children actually worked with the material, quite naturally, their work took them across different subject domains in a most seamless fashion. So, for instance, when the children worked on their 'Maps Project'...on the face of it, their work related to Geography....but it also involved Math, because they had to measure distances and talk of their 'scale of measurement'...it also involved Art, because they had to draw out the maps on their own....and it also involved Language, because the children had to understand the descriptions of the cities carefully in order to make their maps in an accurate manner, do the required reference work, and make their presentation.

Similarly, when they did their 'Human Rights Project', they touched upon History when they learnt about the World Wars and the formation of the United Nations....Law, when they learnt about the various legislations in our country which helped protect child rights....Civics, when they tried to understand the complex reality of child labour....Math, when they represented their survey data with the help of bar graphs and pie diagrams...and of course Language, whenever they did their referencing, or when they prepared and conducted their neighbourhood survey, or when they made their presentation...

*10<sup>th</sup> December is celebrated as the 'Human Rights Day' across the world. This year we decided to celebrate this day at our school as well. We discussed the idea with the children of both Standard 6A and 7A, and all of them showed a ready willingness to study the issue of 'human rights' and 'child rights' in greater detail. Over the next few days, the children learnt about, the two World Wars, the creation of the 'United Nations', some of the key rights laid down in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' and the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', some of the key responsibilities they must be aware of as children and, certain important laws enacted in India to protect the rights of children. All of these discussions helped children understand the history, context and complexities associated with the entire issue of 'human rights'. It was during one such discussion that Kaira from Std. 6A wondered, "Why does the United Nations not stop India and Pakistan from fighting with each other?"*

*The students of Std. 7A also spent some time studying the issue of 'child labour' in greater detail. Together, we went through the highlights of a Government of India report on the status of the child labour situation in India. We tried to understand some specific details about child labour, for instance, its causes, the gender difference, the key employment sectors, the state-wise distribution and so on. Parallely, the students conducted a survey across their neighbourhoods to study the presence of any child labour activity. They spoke to 17 children, who were involved in some form of child labour or another, and tried to find out details regarding the educational status of the child, the nature and hours of work involved, the amount of payment received for the work and so on.*

*Once the children had acquired a sound understanding about the various issues involved in the area of human rights, child rights and child labour...they devoted the next few days towards preparing themselves for their class presentation. This was one of the most complex topics they had ever worked upon and it took them over 25 charts complete with text, pictures, data tables and graphs to get all the important details across! The children worked steadily towards the d-day, all the while continuing to clarify their understanding of the various issues involved and reflecting on the same. One such day, Pooja from Std. 7A had a very interesting question for us...she happened to know a girl in her neighbourhood who both worked, as well as, went to school. So, Pooja wondered what the girl enjoyed more – the school or the work, and when we asked her to take a guess herself, she said, “Maybe both..!”*

*Finally, after about 3-weeks or so, on 14<sup>th</sup> December, the students of Std. 6A and 7A, made their presentation. The presentation proved to be extremely detailed and informative, and the students displayed a great sense of confidence and understanding of the issues involved. The audience really appreciated the efforts taken by the students to present such a complex topic in a clear and comprehensive manner. Many of them specially appreciated the fact that the students of Std. 7A had actually gone around their neighbourhoods to study the problem of child labour.*

*In all, the entire experience turned out to be one of its kind! As Saloni from Std. 7A said, “This project was different from any other, because it talked about our present and our future” and also because, “through this project, we did not just share information, we actually asked people to change something – to stop child labour, to protect child rights”.*



Through our work therefore, we learnt how ‘knowledge’ cannot really be compartmentalised into ‘History’, ‘Art’, ‘Geography’, ‘Music’, ‘Science’...that these domains of knowledge have been artificially created by us just for our convenience...that the real fun and the real learning, lies in integrating music, drama, and art with science, history and math...that therefore, all domains of knowledge and skills are valuable in their own way.

### **Initiating one's own work....**

Somewhere towards the end of our first academic year in the RR, I started to feel that we needed to change something about the way we worked in the RR. By this time, the children were very comfortable choosing material from the shelves and working with it in different innovative ways. However truly speaking, I and the other teachers were still playing a role in directing some of their work. For instance, all the bigger projects that year, like the 'Timeline of Mahatma Gandhi', the 'Indus Valley Project', the 'Shadow Puppet Show' and the 'Maps Project', had in some way or another, been triggered by me or one of my colleagues.

Things did not have to be that way anymore. Most of the children were now consistently displaying a keen eagerness to seek newer challenges...all on their own. They were ready to take an even greater control of their work, and we just needed to give them the opportunity to do so...

So, from the next academic year onwards, we changed a little something in the way we made our 'Work Plans'. The children could now choose to do a 'Special Project' as one of their 3 tasks on the 'Work Plan' (the other two tasks having to do with English and Math). This 'Special Project' was to be their own idea...it could be inspired by something they had seen or heard in the RR...or not, that did not matter. The RR could have some material or book on their chosen topic of work...or not, that did not matter either. This was basically their chance to explore their own, unique interest-areas....there were no limits.

It was as if a dam just burst open. Soon, we had a range of 'Special Projects' going on in the RR...



**The Seed Germination Project**

*It was the large Entada seed pod which really started it all. That single seed pod was enough to ignite the children's curiosity about the different kinds of seed pods that they saw around them. A few days of enthusiastic effort, and we had an enviable collection of seed pods in class. One of them, happened to be the seed pod of the Kapok tree and somebody thought of planting the Kapok seeds. That led Chaya, to think about planting some more seeds. The next day, she was ready with 5 different types of seeds! In order to identify the names of the seeds, she decided to look through the 'Seed Picture Cards', and this in turn, got her excited about planting even more seeds. Few days down the line, Chaya had a collection of 22 different seeds all planted and labeled neatly in 22 different pots! Along the way, she found a work-partner in her classmate Payal. Together, they created their 'Seed Germination Observation Charts', where they recorded the name of the seeds, the dates on which they were sown, the date when the first seedling arrived and their weekly observations. They even celebrated the weekly birthdays of their seedlings! At the end of about 4 weeks, they made a presentation to their class about their project. By then, some seeds had grown into small plants, others had developed into seedlings and still others, were yet to germinate! We all talked about the names of the seeds, their cotyledons, their embryos and their seedlings. A single child's effort helped all of us look at seeds and germination a little more closely!*



### **The Shadow Puppet Show on the Life-cycle of the Salmon Fish**

*This monsoon the children in Standard 7, happened to collect some tadpoles. We kept the tadpoles in the Resource Room for a few days. Needless to say, this initiated a lot of animated conversation about frogs, their life-cycles and so on. All this discussion inspired some children in Standard 6 to do a project on the life-cycle of a fish. They looked through some books and zeroed down on the 'Salmon fish'. Last year, these children had seen the students of Standard 6 (who are now in Standard 7), do a shadow puppet show based on a Panchatantra story... they had really enjoyed the same, and so they decided to use the shadow-puppet technique for their project as well! The next few weeks were spent in pouring over the details of the life-cycle of the 'Alaska Salmon' fish. The 6 children divided up the 7 stages of the life-cycle between themselves and started writing the details about each stage with the help of their teacher. Simultaneously, they also started preparing their shadow puppets and screen. They also wrote a small skit to serve as an introduction to the presentation. They even requested their teacher to help them with a song to summarize the entire life-cycle at the end of the show. After practicing diligently for a few days, the children were finally ready for their show. On 12 October, they performed their shadow puppet show on the life-cycle of the Salmon fish for the students of Standard 5, 6 and 7. The children watched the show intently, completely mesmerized by the movements of the shadow puppets. At the end of the show, some children wondered why the Salmon fish went all the way to the Pacific Ocean and others complimented the presenters on their puppets. It was a beautiful presentation, packed with information and presented in a very elegant and engaging manner!*



### **The Musical Instruments Project**

We always start a Resource Room class by making silence for a few minutes. This activity which is called 'Silent time', is often accompanied with some soft instrumental music. One day, during a Standard 6 class, we started talking about the kinds of sounds that we could hear in those musical pieces and also about the instruments which were producing all those sounds. One thing led to another, and soon we were talking about how sounds are produced and how our ears help us hear those sounds. We also looked more closely at the 'musical instruments picture cards' in the Resource Room, and started understanding how instruments could be classified into wind, string and percussion instruments. All these discussions, led a group of children to conclude that that would like to do a special project wherein, they would make their own wind, string and percussion instruments. Once the decision was made, they next couple of weeks were spent in creating the most innovative musical instruments ever! The humble measuring can was converted into an ektara, coconut shells were made into tablas, straws and pipes became flutes and glass bottles were converted into shakers and xylophones! At the same time, the children also researched some books and magazines to find out some key details relating to 'sound' for instance, what is sound, how is it produced, how do human beings produce sounds while talking, what are loud and soft sounds, what are dangerous sounds and so on. They made charts based on all the information they so collected and at the end of two weeks or so, they were ready with their presentation. On 12 October they presented their work to the students of Standards 5, 6 and 7. The students were greatly enthused to learn so much about 'sound' and 'musical instruments'. The highlight of course was the exhibition of the musical instruments made by the children! There were more than 14 instruments in all...and all the children from Standards 1 through 7 came to see the exhibition. The presenters had a great time explaining how they made the instruments and demonstrating how each one of them had to be played. Needless to say, their audience was absolutely thrilled to see their collection and was more than willing to play each and every instrument...preferably, more than once!



### **Strengthening oneself from within...**

The children's work in the RR, taught them about much more than math or English, science or geography. It taught them to build on something far more impactful...far more enduring...it taught them to build on their life-skills and their values.

They learnt to initiate their work and follow it through to its successful completion. They learnt to be accountable and to take ownership for their learning. They learnt to collaborate purposefully with others in order to achieve their goals. They learnt to plan and organize their work in an effective manner. They learnt to value hard work and perseverance. They learnt to believe in themselves and to have high expectations from themselves. And, like much else in the RR, this too, happened very naturally through their work...

### ***Learning to judge one's work honestly and objectively***

*Sujal writes well. He tries to express different ideas and explores various sentence structures, vocabulary and punctuation in his writing. He and I had been speaking about how his writing skills had improved over time and how he now needed to focus on making his writing increasingly error-free. Soon after, he was doing a writing assignment, and he came to me for a joint review of two of his drafts. Before starting the work, I asked him which one, in his opinion, was a better written piece. He had a clear answer to that question and when we went over the two drafts together, I found myself to be completely in agreement with his judgment. It was very heartening to see how well he had evaluated the two pieces and also how honest and sincere he was about his work!*

*One day, we were talking about the importance of watching different informational TV shows like the National Geographic, Animal Planet etc.. We also discussed how it would be helpful to watch these shows in English. After the discussion was over and the children had started settling down with their work, Anjali came up to me and said, "Teacher, I watch only cartoons, but two of them are in English." I was so touched, both by her honesty and her sincerity!*

### ***Learning to take ownership of one's work***

*A group of children, including Sunita were studying 'Constellations'. We found a book which told us about the constellations visible in the night sky through the months of January, February and March. We talked about how much fun it would be to really look for all those constellations at night. The next day, Sunita came to class all excited, and waving a piece of paper in her hand. She had tried to look for the 'Orion' constellation, the previous night. Since she did not have any book/note to tell her what the 'Orion' exactly looked like, she had depended on her memory to identify the constellation correctly. She had drawn what she thought looked like 'Orion' on a piece of paper and had brought that paper along to compare it with the actual drawing of the constellation given in the book! It was so heartening to see the effort and ownership she brought to her work...! By the next day, all the children working on 'Constellations' had been given a copy of the January - March sky map. From that day on...we had many conversations about the different constellations we managed (or did not manage) to see in the sky!*

*Ravi and two of his classmates were working on the India map. They were trying to identify the states and their headquarters on the big India map and then marking the same on their own blank India maps. After they completed their maps, we had a discussion wherein we looked at the locations of the different states carefully, read out their names correctly, checked their spellings and so on. While doing so, we realized that sometimes some of the children had missed out on marking some states, or were finding it difficult to pronounce their names or write their spellings down correctly. We kept on correcting the work as we went along...and at some stage, one of the children said that he would do this work again so that he could do it without any mistakes. Immediately, all the other children said that they would do so too as well. It was just one of those moments when all you had to do, was sit back and see children take charge of their learning! Subsequently, all three of them repeated this work and when we sat down for a discussion again...Ravi was able to point out 'Meghalaya' on the map before I even finished saying the name out loud... Manoj could locate the state headquarters of just about any state, in a second and, Mohit could locate all the states on his map correctly as well as, read out their names far more confidently!*

### **Learning to apply one's learning in the real world**

*We had been learning about different kinds of newspapers and magazines in the Resource Room those days. Siraj happened to be one of the students selected for a school exhibition at the offices of British Petroleum (BP). Sometime during the day, while interacting with the employees of BP, Siraj asked them if they had an 'in-house newsletter' at BP. He had just learnt about the meaning of 'in-house newsletters/magazines' in the Resource Room...and he had not wasted any time in applying that knowledge in a new context!*

### **Learning to extend one's learning**

*Chaya was working with the flags of different countries of the world. She was putting together certain details about the flags for example, the name of the country, the capital, the currency etc.. She was collecting this information from a couple of different sources available in the Resource Room. The next day, she brought her Marathi notebook and showed me a table at the back of the notebook which had some information about the different countries of the world – their capitals, languages, religions etc.. She was really happy to have discovered the table and we found some additional information that she could include in her work. She even suggested that we take a photocopy of that page from her notebook and place it in the Resource Room...which, I promptly did! One more example of a child integrating various life experiences together and in the process, taking her learning forward!*

*The Standard 5 students had discussed a question 'How are books made?', as part of the 'I wonder box' initiative. After the discussion, I had put up the information around this question on the class soft board and requested the Standard 6 and 7 students to also have a look. A couple of days later, Sunidhi from Standard 6 came up and told me that she had seen the same topic being discussed on 'Discovery Science' – the TV channel. As I was thinking to myself about how nicely she was connecting her different experiences together...she suggested, that I should watch it too and even told me the time at which the show was aired. Not content with just that, she even asked me the next day if I had seen the show or not. Unfortunately, I had not...and I felt awfully guilty telling her so. The next holiday I had, I made sure I saw some 'Discovery Science', just so I could at least tell her that I had tried! Once again, a child was racing ahead of me and I was trying to play 'catch-up'!*

### **Learning to value one's experiences**

*We had just started with the 'currency project'...in fact, at that time, we had not even given it the shape of any 'project'...we were just enjoying the different currencies we had begun to collect. I was showing some new coins and notes that I had collected from my friends...and we were all pouring over them! Suddenly, Shlok asked, "Will you have to return these currencies to your friends?" His eyes had that little sense of apprehension...'what if she says 'yes'?...thankfully, my answer was a 'no', since I had my friends' permission to use the currency samples at school. But what a moment, I so respected his anxiety...his concern, about the possibility of losing access to something interesting and exciting!*

### **Learning to lay down expectations from oneself**

*Amaan, Arul and Punit had been working on some information regarding the life-span and breeding habits of certain vertebrate animals. Now, we were talking about doing some further research on some of the animals and I asked them to decide, how many animals they would like to study (individually). They thought for a minute and then Amaan said 3, Arul 2 and Punit 1. I just loved the way they used their personal judgment to decide the level of their challenge while handling the peer pressure and (I dare say!) the weight of my expectations.*

### **Learning to be of help**

*We keep a 'paper tray' in the Resource Room for the children's work...and as expected, we are always running out of paper. One day, Nisha brought in a bunch of papers and some blank envelopes. She had especially requested her grandfather for the same since she had noticed that we often need papers and other stationary items in the Resource Room. I felt so grateful to her for her thoughtfulness and her help!*

### **Learning to think creatively**

*We were reading a poem in the Resource Room titled 'Cat envy'. The poem was about a little girl envying a cat for the relaxed and comfortable life it led, compared to her own which was full of rules and tasks! After reading the poem, we were just discussing the views of the author and thinking about whether we too felt the same way, when Aakash raised a very different point altogether. He said, "But cats have problems too...people sometimes step on them!" It was a beautiful moment...Aakash had evaluated the poet's view point against his own knowledge and experience and in the process, drawn our attention to something we were all ignoring..! We could not help but agree with him...suddenly, everything had been set into perspective again!*

*And then, Taniya raised a very different point altogether. She asked, "Just like we are thinking that it would be so good to be a cat and not a human being, do the cats also sometimes think that it would be good to be human beings and not a cat?" It was an amazing thought which had not occurred to anyone at all! The children now started discussing Taniya's question, with some feeling that cats never think like that and other believing that they do!*

### **Learning to question and hypothesize**

*We were reading a book on studying the night sky, and we came across a reference about the 'Polaris' or the North Star. We were reading about how people used to look at this star to find directions and navigate their way to different locations. So, Shikha asked, "What if we were at sea and we got lost in the day time, then what would we do?" No one had thought about this...so we all just burst out laughing! The children tried to come up with possible solutions for the problem and we continued to think about this over the next day...till we all agreed that we could study the movement of the sun and solve the problem. The beauty of course lay in the question itself...and the subsequent hypothesizing!*

*Another time, while reading the same book, we came across some details about our natural satellite the 'moon'. We were talking about how the Earth's gravitational force acts on the moon as well. So, someone asked "If gravity is pulling the moon also, then why does it not fall on the Earth...just lie on Earth...like we are on Earth?"...It was a good question and it got the children thinking. One child ventured, "Maybe there is an opposing force on the moon...so the gravity pulls it in one direction...and the other force pulls it in the other direction...so the moon stays in its place?" Another child said, "There are so many of us on Earth, maybe the gravity gets over...there is only enough gravity left to pull the moon till that much distance and not any closer?" So many beautiful things were happening all at the same time. The children were thinking about what they were reading, they were coming up with questions and they were patiently and thoughtfully formulating possible answers. Best of all, they were doing all this completely on their own...my presence, was rather incidental!*

### ***Learning to gain inspiration from others***

*We have the flags of different Asian countries in the Resource Room. Children like to work with them and usually draw the flag on a piece of paper and write down some key details about the country it belongs to. At times, we encourage children to do some deeper research about the concerned country. One day it so happened, that while Alok was working on his flag, (he was making a simple table giving some basic information about the country), he saw another child (who was also working with a flag) ask for some more information in order to do greater research on his country. Alok spent some time watching the other child's work, and then he too came up to me and asked for some more information to write a more detailed note on the country he was researching. It was a wonderful example of how children can naturally inspire each other to do more...!*

### ***Learning to be accountable***

*Trisha and Mustafa had been given the responsibility of watering the Kapok seeds that we had sown in a small bowl. While Trisha kept her promise, Mustafa unfortunately, was not so committed. A few days later, Trisha decided to plant some more seeds (different types) in separate containers. The idea sounded very exciting and Mustafa immediately jumped up to partner Trisha on her project. Without batting an eye-lid, Trisha said a firm 'No' clearly stating that since he had not done his part the last time around, she did not want to partner with him again. Mustafa accepted her decision without any protest. It was just amazing to see how the two children worked it all out between themselves...how they laid down their standards of 'right and wrong behaviour'... and how they held themselves to it...and the teachers did not have to say a word!*

### ***Learning to enjoy and take pride in one's work***

*Mohan and Kunal had completed a writing activity where they had used picture and word cues to write a story. They had chosen the same topic but had written the story separately. Writing complete and accurate sentences is a challenge for both of them. They had therefore, spent a considerable amount of time first writing the story on their own and then revising it with my help. Completing the story was a big achievement for both of them and deserved a celebration. I asked them if they would like to read out their story to their class-mates. Both of them agreed to do so with great enthusiasm. The first thing Kunal did the next day, was remind me about the plan! They read out their stories to the class with clarity and understanding. Everybody enjoyed their lovely stories and they themselves felt on top of the world!*



### **Learning to persevere**

Anu and Jaya were part of the group that were working on the 'Constellations' project. Since we all had a copy of the January – March sky map, we were all trying to locate the different constellations in the sky every night. Almost all of us had seen the 'Orion' by now... but little else. And then, one day Anu and Jaya said that they saw 'Lepus' as well...which lies very close to 'Orion', but is very faint in comparison and can be seen only on a really clear night. I had managed to see 'Orion' a couple of days back...and since we had read that the other constellations were harder to spot...I had basically stopped looking. Till that day when Anu and Jaya spoke about 'Lepus'... and I realized what a mistake I was making! Luckily for me, that night turned out to be a very clear night and just like the children had said...there was 'Lepus' twinkling away! I could not help but wonder...who really was being the 'teacher' here. I had just been taught (re-taught?) one of the greatest lessons of life...of keeping my curiosity alive...of persevering... and my 'teachers' had been none other than my own 'students'.

We had had a demonstration of the 'Writing Process' for the Standard 7 students, a while back. Sarthak had now chosen to write a story on the topic "If I were a bird..." We had a discussion about how he should use the steps of the 'writing process' to take his work forward and so on. A couple of days later, it became evident however, that he was struggling. As I sat down for a discussion with him, I realized that he was finding it very difficult to transfer the skills acquired in the earlier 'writing process' exercise, to this new writing activity. It was as if he just could not see the similarity between the two tasks and was therefore finding it difficult to transfer the knowledge he had acquired in one, to the other. We went over the steps of the 'writing process' again and I demonstrated to him how he could use the same steps to create a story on his chosen topic, just like we had done with another topic earlier...that essentially the two tasks were the same and hence, we could use the same strategy for completing both of them successfully. It was only after this discussion, did Sarthak truly 'understand' what he needed to do and why... and his face lit up with both, a sense of relief and a sense of confidence! We completed the first step of the 'writing process' which is 'pre-writing' together. By now, Sarthak was very comfortable with the work and he confidently took his writing through the stages of the 'first' and the 'revised' drafts. We came together again for the final 'editing and proof-reading', and it was clear that he had put in a very sincere effort. Together, we worked on the piece...adding details, changing things here and there...till, we had a beautiful story in front of us. He went over the story a couple of times, just to be sure of every detail, and then I asked him if he would like to 'publish' his story in any way. We spoke about the various ways in which he could 'publish' or 'share' his story...and he finally decided to create a 'story-book'. This was not surprising at all, because...Sarthak truly enjoys art...and the moment he started thinking about 'publishing'...he started thinking about writing his story with illustrations...and so he eventually decided on the 'story-book' format! In his own words, "I will make a picture for each paragraph...the story is very clear in my mind...!" Over the next few weeks, Sarthak worked on his 'story-book' and it turned out to be a really beautiful piece of work. From being unsure about how to begin his work, to creating a whole story-book...Sarthak had certainly come a long way in just a few weeks!

### Gaining insight...a 'teacher' learns

The one person however, for whom this experience served to be the biggest learning opportunity ever, was undoubtedly me. Being part of the RR, helped me understand what it truly meant to 'partner' children in their journey of growth and development. It helped me understand that it was not about directing the children's thinking, but rather creating opportunities which enabled them to think for themselves...that it was not about providing them with the answers, but rather helping them strengthen the capacity to find their own...that it was not about imparting a given body of knowledge and skills, but rather creating such conditions which encouraged the children to take charge of their own learning...

It made me realize, that my real responsibility was about creating and maintaining a positive and productive learning environment and, serving as a resource for the facilitation of the children's work, as and when required. Nothing more, nothing less.

*Both the 'Constellations' group and the 'Dinosaurs' group were very keen to present their work to the other children. The term was almost coming to a close and for one reason or another, we were finding it difficult to find an opportune time to schedule the presentation. An opportunity suddenly opened up on the very last day of the term. With I and the other teachers tied up with some term-ending work...the only way we could schedule the presentation was if the children agreed to prepare for it on their own and that too with just an hour's notice in hand. We asked the children what they would like to do, and they readily agreed to take up the challenge. By this time, the children had had the experience of presenting their work on at least 2- 3 earlier occasions. They had also had many opportunities to observe the presentations made by other children. They therefore, drew from all of these past experiences when they presented their projects to us that day. In everything that they did, whether it was about, introducing their presentation in an engaging manner or, organizing their presentation into different sections or, taking turns to ensure everybody got a chance to participate or, trying to make their presentations interesting by asking questions to the audience...it was just lovely to see how they tried to apply all that they had learnt earlier. The fact that they rose to the challenge of putting these presentations together in a very short time, as also the fact that they put forth a commendable effort, made us all feel that they were now ready to prepare for such presentations on an independent basis and do a very good job of it too!*

And thus, the two years that I spent in the RR opened up a world of learning for me. I began to understand what children are truly capable of given the right opportunities and, I began to understand a little something about my own role in the class room.

At a personal level, my work in the RR also helped me gain a deeper understanding of my own capabilities...what I was good at and where I needed help. I now feel more aware of my own work patterns, and consequently, also of what I need to improve upon in order to carry out my responsibilities more effectively. For instance, perhaps I can be more empathetic and patient with the children, while still having high expectations from them or, I can be more conscious of not allowing my individual inclinations influence the way the classroom is equipped or the kind-of work

that gets done. These realizations as many others, are the learnings I hope to benefit from in the years to come.

As I come to end of this journey....a final tip of the hat to the heroes and heroines of this story – the children.

Although the RR offered a very different working environment and placed some very unfamiliar demands on the children, it was only a matter of time before the children embraced everything that the RR stood for. In hindsight, it seems hardly surprising that the children responded so positively. After all, the RR provided them with the most natural and free learning environment...one, which not only respected their unique learning interests, but also gave them the unhindered opportunity to pursue the same. Even so, it is to the children's credit that they grabbed this opportunity with utmost enthusiasm and motivation. The fact that they came from an environment which was both, filled with hardships as well as, severely constrained in terms of resources and exposure, never once came in the way of their imagination or will. It was their undying curiosity and easy acceptance of any challenge...which led us to create a most diverse, intriguing and joyful body of work...way beyond the realms of any curriculum...way beyond, I dare say, even our own imagination. It was their unwavering commitment and sense of ownership...which enabled us to move from one fruitful experience to another...which ultimately, gave meaning to the existence of the RR.

For all this, and more....I owe them, big time.

-----

Much like a gardener, a teacher too, must strive to provide all the right conditions  
for a delightful bloom...

Much like a gardener, a teacher too, must humbly accept that while she has an important role to  
play, the real magic, lies within the seed...

### **Aseema Charitable Trust**

Aseema is a Mumbai-based non-governmental organization with a mission to equip children from marginalized communities with high quality, value based education enabling development of their limitless potential. In partnership with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), Aseema supports three municipal schools where children receive high quality education. Aseema also reaches out to the tribal children in the villages of Igatpuri through the Sitabai Kavji Mengal Anganwadi at Jambhwadi and the Aseema Bal Shaikshanik Kendra at Awalkheda.

I am sincerely grateful to Aseema for their overall support towards the creation of this book and especially for their permission to include some classroom photographs in the same.

To know more about Aseema's work, please visit [www.aseema.org](http://www.aseema.org)

The pdf version of this book can also be found on Mr. Arvind Gupta's website at the following link <http://arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/sonika-unconventional.pdf>

**Mr. Arvind Gupta** is a science populariser and toymaker. He did a BTech from IIT Kanpur in 1975. He has received several honours, including the inaugural National Award for Science Popularization amongst Children (1988), Distinguished Alumnus Award of IIT, Kanpur (2000), Indira Gandhi Award for Science Popularization (2008) and the Third World Academy of Science Award (2010) for making science interesting for children. He shares his passion for books and toys through his popular website <http://arvindguptatoys.com>

I feel privileged to receive Mr. Arvind Gupta's support and encouragement, and remain deeply grateful to him for the same.

-----