

# KOLKATA Project

The Froebel Trust: Visit to India – 6<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016

## INTRODUCTION

---

This is the eighth visit to Kolkata and our sixth visit engaged in training teachers at the eight schools with whom we are working to develop a Froebelian approach to their provision. Six schools are run jointly by the Kolkata police, Nabadisha [New dawn] Schools, and the NGO Parivar Charitable Foundation led by Anindita Tamta. Two schools are run solely by Parivar, Lenin Sarani and Tiljala.

This visit is the last visit for the current training team and one of the main objectives of this visit was to evaluate the work so far and consider next steps.

During our stay we visited all the participating schools and through observation and discussion with the teachers and children made evaluations of the provision [See setting evaluation notes].

Our overall impressions were very positive and we have been encouraged and impressed by the obvious gains in confidence evident in the teachers. Their levels of enthusiasm and engagement with Froebelian practices continues to grow.

We met with Anindita to explore ways of sustaining the project and discussed the progress many of her teachers had made. We emphasised the need to support and nurture these largely unqualified teachers who are now developing practices very different to those found in many Kolkata classrooms.

Anindita joined us for a visit to the Modern High School for Girls to meet the Director, Devi Kar, whose article in the Calcutta Telegraph in October 2015 on the state of Indian education prompted us to get in touch. The school has a picture of Froebel with a quote-*“to learn a thing in life through doing is much more developing, cultivating, and strengthening than to learn it merely through the verbal communication of ideas”*, displayed alongside others including Dewey, Gandhi and Tagore. The MHSG also has a department for continuing education, the Modern Academy of Continuing Education [MACE], working in collaboration with Calcutta University.

This visit has seen a more productive relationship with the police, AC Basu and Sovan Banerjee [in charge of community policing]. This is in no small way helped by the relationships Asim Dutta has established with them. At a meeting with AC Basu to discuss our evaluations we outlined the limitations placed on some settings because of the poor condition of their buildings. He responded immediately by requesting inspections and remedial work to be completed as soon as possible. We left additional documentation with him which gave details of Froebel’s principles and practices.

## PROJECT EVALUATION

---

The teachers were all very pleased to see us on our visits and expressed pride in their involvement in the project. Details of our school based assessments can be found in the appendix.

Many teachers are able to identify significant differences in their practice through using a Froebelian approach and evidenced this with outcomes including increased attendance, better behaviour, happier children, greater concentration spans, better achievement in their formal school and, not least, teachers enjoying their work.

Our observations supported this, particularly in those settings where we have spent most time - West Port, Taltala and Lenin Sarani. Here we saw children whose use of the resources has developed in sophistication and complexity, resources are being combined effectively and often used to create imaginary scenarios which is leading into storytelling and writing.

We also observed higher levels of cooperation and collaboration and improved social skills in the children and an increased sense of community and respect for each other and the resources.

A number of teachers commented on the fact that they observed the children more, rather than directing them, in line with Froebel's thoughts on freedom with guidance.

Some settings were beginning to make use of first hand experiences bringing in resources such as leaves and plants. Gita at Sinthi has worked with the children to take plant cuttings which are now growing in pots on the balcony.

We also saw two new teachers very keen for further information and support as they struggled with the challenges of changing practices, introducing new ways of working and new resources.

During this visit we were accompanied by Rajtilak Sarker who supports the day to day Parivar school organisation; he also attended the seminar. Other team leaders with whom we have worked in the past were unavailable this time. We spoke with Anindita about the need for Raj to monitor school resources, for example paper and drawing materials, to ensure teachers have what they need. This does of course require further fund raising issues and we gave Anindita written information on Froebelian principles to share with her sponsors.

Two schools have been resourced by a company called "Wall o' Books" which provides books for children to borrow. The books are aimed at those who can read Hindi and Bengali.

## VISIT TO MODERN HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, KOLKATA

---

We were welcomed to MHSG by the Director, Devi Kar, and met with her and other members of her leadership team to discuss our work in Kolkata. We were shown around the school by the principal, Mrs. Mukerjee, visiting classes from nursery through to secondary. The school's clear ethos, which resonates strongly with Froebelian ideas, is evident throughout. There is a sense of calm busyness, high levels of well-being and engagement in staff and children and a clear intention to encourage community involvement and to look outside for inspiration and knowledge. The curriculum was broad and balanced and the older children made good use of their skills to develop their ideas and creativity.

The early years classes were engaged in developing early writing skills by copying and tracing. This aspect of provision is not one recognised as Froebelian and it appeared that their early years approach left little time for play and practical first hand explorations in the classroom setting. However whilst the work is largely teacher directed the children do engage in a wide range of activities designed to explore a broad and relevant curriculum.

The school also has a continuing education centre, MACE. They run a 6-month teacher training certificate course in collaboration with the University of Calcutta through its outreach programme and also run Saturday seminars. We spoke with Ms. Indrani Mallick about the possibility of Parivar teachers attending teacher training courses and I have since been in contact with Ms. Damayanti Lahiri to put her in touch with Anindita who can follow this up.

## SEMINAR

---

The seminar was again attended by someone from every setting, fifteen teachers in all. The teachers have good relationships with each other and are clearly collaborating and sharing ideas. They were all able to contribute to the discussions with confidence and with enjoyment.

The focus of the session was to revisit the Froebelian principles upon which we have based our training and to link it to examples of good practice seen on our visits. There was a particular focus on active children, linking learning and freedom with guidance. We also explored the role of the teacher in supporting learning using the analogy of a cook making a biryani for a feast.

This was very well received with a number of teachers in the final summing up saying they would think about the biryani when they were planning their sessions. This was particularly encouraging as planning was not something that featured in their work at all when we started.

We finished the session with Kate telling the story, The Dot by Peter H. Reynolds. The teachers immediately recognised the significance of the role of the teacher in the story. We had observed in our visits that more settings were allowing the children to draw without direction. This a big change as almost all schools we have visited in our time in Kolkata have displayed drawings and art work which has been copied.

The teachers are all keen to maintain contact in order to share their work and to learn more. We agreed to keep in touch via email and WhatsApp with Anindita and the teachers.

## NEXT STEPS

---

There is a great enthusiasm for continued involvement with the Froebel Trust from Anindita and the teachers at Parivar. The work so far has created a strong foundation upon which to build and widen the scope of the project. There are settings and teachers who are able to demonstrate effective early years provision which reflects Froebelian ideas.

Our visit to MHSG may also offer a number of possible paths to develop the scope of the project both with the school and with MACE.

Possible lines of development could include-

1. Continued support from the current team through email, skype and WhatsApp, possibly linking into the Parivar monthly staff meetings to maintain the momentum in the short term.
2. We have identified confident and effective Parivar teachers at Taltala who would visit other settings to support them and also receive teachers at their setting to demonstrate the positive outcomes of their Froebelian practice.
3. An interim visit by Asim with a Skype link to the current team. This has been successful in the past and again would maintain contact in the short term.
4. Continued monitoring and support visits to schools by a new Froebel team; Asim is happy to continue to support and this would be key as he knows the personnel involved, is familiar with the course content so far and is very effective as the team support ,translator and photographer.
5. Further seminars on aspects of Froebelian practice led by a Froebel tutor.
6. Supporting Parivar in developing links with MACE in order to access teacher training. The course is delivered in English and a preliminary language course is available.
7. Possible MACE Saturday seminar by a Froebelian tutor which may open doors for further work with the early years department of MHSG and Calcutta University.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

---

In the course of the two and a half years we have been involved training teachers at Parivar there have been, as a result, significant changes in the lives of the children and the teachers. Using a Froebelian approach, with particular reference to his ideas on unity, connectedness and community, we have been able to link into the culture of West Bengal drawing on, for example, the work of Rabindranath Tagore and found shared ideals and values with other organisations with whom we have worked. Our work has evolved in response to those with whom we are working and their circumstances; it takes time to gather local knowledge, build trusting relationships and explore possibilities. We now have a strong foundation upon which to build and to explore further how a Froebelian approach can be shared with a wider audience in Kolkata with the aim of influencing and supporting more children and teachers. For the Trust there are opportunities to explore and affirm the relevance of Froebel's principles and practices in different countries, cultures and settings.

Sara Holroyd: Kolkata Project leader/Froebel teacher/tutor

Jill Leyberg: Froebel Teacher/tutor

Kate Razzall: Teacher/tutor

Asim Dutta: Interpreter and Support coordinator