

SAIER Annual Report 2015-2016

Life Education Centre

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Introduction

[Life Education Centre](#) (LEC) provides access to value-oriented education and vocational training for young village women, and aims to improve their socio-economic conditions through capacity building and personal empowerment.

Activities of the year and their outcomes

Art therapy: 8 month program (Krupa)

Between September 2015 and May 2016, a steady group of 6-8 women from the surrounding villages were guided in a creative process to deepen and express aspects of themselves. The curriculum included a progression of learning technical art skills, while gradually building towards telling a personal story through their art explorations. Meditation and visualization techniques were used to help create a group ritual and safe space for their expression. Beginning with color theory and mixing, the women had opportunities in each session to connect their everyday reality, memories, and dreams into their drawings and paintings. Each woman developed a storyboard with an original concept of either their life story or a story with personal significance, and are each currently finalizing their story translated onto a full-length sari (including drawing, painting and stitching).

Outcomes:

- Sense of mastery: almost all of the women involved demonstrate improved technical skill and confidence in art media.
- Original self-expression: the long-term curriculum reduced judgment, fear, and blocks to creativity, nurturing unique styles in each woman (a milestone, as generally most individuals copy each other and cannot express originally).
- Self-esteem: all women exhibit an improved sense of self, each actively engaged in an empowerment process. A couple of them have taken on role-model positions, helping demonstrate open and free expression to the other women. Each woman took on a leadership role in the group, by rotation, such that the group worked on the final pieces one at a time.
- Metaphor: several women began to develop symbols to represent people, emotions, and events in their lives – all connecting to a very important and often less-understood aspect of traditional storytelling and art-making (and art therapy).
- Emotional catharsis: several of the women bravely shared painful moments in their lives, using art processes with awareness to help release the emotions openly. They let go of the traumatic memories and reported feeling relief afterwards.
- Gender issues: all women shared the various challenges of being a young woman raised in the local Tamil culture, telling of the frustration, fear, shame, and confusion particularly surrounding their first menstruation.
- Cultural Relevance: the sari became the platform for familiarity, as well as the playful space to express resistances.
- Mindfulness: decreased anxiety and physical pain; improved concentration and imagination through meditation exercises.
- Empathy: improved patience and listening skills in hearing and connecting to each other's stories and working collectively.
- Bonding: with the regular students especially, a particular sense of sisterhood evolved in sharing of stories (distinct from previous challenges with mixed age/ability groups at LEC), filled with encouragement, humor, support and affection.
- Sense of legacy: taking the time to carefully express their life stories in detail is an achievement to be shared.



Cooking with Local vegetables: 6 month program (Buvanasundari)

The intention of the classes is well known: to introduce the usage of millets and local vegetables to the students as well as to Aurovilians and guests. During this year's program, the preparations demonstrated were traditional ones. Out of sixteen recipes taught, the dishes were divided as:

- soup,
- main course using varagu (millet) + parboiled broken rice,
- snack from banyard millet,
- side dishes using locally grown vegetables only (brinjal, cluster beans, long beans, pumpkin, green cooking banana, 3-4 varieties of gourds, coconut, spinach), and
- healthy desserts.

One of the deserts, "Thirupullani paayasam", is given to the devotees in a famous temple near Rameswaram. The students were very fortunate to visit this temple in March, and the following week they tried out this new recipe!

Outcomes:

The teacher witnessed the enthusiasm, group action, and coordination among the students trying out what they learnt and most of all learning the traditional recipes. She would like to teach more to the students (even though the attendance was low) and would love that this ancient Tamil Culture is carried on to the next generations through their palate. Most of the students tried the dishes at their homes which were well received by the family members.

The main impact of these classes is that the students who attended started consuming millets (and re-acquiring their liking for millets) and now can understand the value of the millets. They also gained the skills to organize a small menu (from the recipes taught) to serve about 15 people.

The students also had ample opportunity to practice recipes needed in photo sessions for our book [*Sustainable Palate*](#).



Study-tour: 3 day study trip to Rameswaram (Harini)

This period of 3 days in March was a very serious pilgrimage into the richness and glory of the past of this land called India, in its southernmost tip. It was a flashback into the epoch of the

Ramanayana and hence a very studied and guided experience. The entire journey was one of narrating folklore, mythology, stories, that made the experience vivid and rich. The travel lasting more than 6 hours we saw the changing landscapes, could see how water supply shortage and salt water intrusion were playing such havoc in the agriculture and lives of people. We could also see another aspect of the same Tamil Nadu: its highly rich culture, in spite of scarcity of natural resources, and the effect of the royalty of this region, living and part of the lives of the people.

We stayed at the Thayumanavar Swamigal Tapovanam, the abode of a 17th century Tamil saint. In this very quiet *tapovanam* (place of penance and meditation), where we stayed for the 3 days, we could meditate, learn about the saint, and offer our daily prayers. This experience was unique – the premises, located right in the midst of a bustling town, was so quiet and the silence made it feel that we were in an island.

We visited the famous Adi Jaganatha temple (Vishnu) featuring amongst the 108 venerated shrines, called Thirupullani; here Lord Rama is in deep contemplation – resting on a bed of grass (*darbasayanam*) – about his plans to wage a war in Sri Lanka. The ancient Uttarakosamangai temple (Siva), is where Siva is said to have imparted Vedic knowledge to his consort Parvati. And inside the huge Rameswaram temple we visited different shrines and learnt about each of them. The highlight of this temple visit was chanting the “*Ramanatha suprabatham*” in the corridors of the temple, much to our joy and satisfaction. We had practiced this piece for more than 6 months, as part of our chanting classes in LEC and therefore chose Rameswaram as our study-tour destination.

The highest point of the island of Rameswaram is Gandamadhana Parvatham, from where, mythology says, Rama found his inspiration to cross the ocean. The temple at Dhanuskodi, the tip of the Rameswaram island, is where the temple history records Vibeeshana (the brother of Ravana) surrendering to Rama and offering his forces to wage a war against Ravana. A local village shrine, Nambunayagiamman temple, houses the presiding deity of more than half of the villages surrounding Ramanathapuram; here can be seen the sand dunes created by the ocean over the years, raising the level of the temple and its surroundings to the height of a small hillock. Dr. Abdul Kalam’s residence in Ramanathapuram has now been converted into a museum, and his grave is on the sandy shores. Devipattinam – a coastal village where there are 9 stones in the backwaters, signifying the 9 planets – is where Rama offered his prayers, before setting out to Sri Lanka. These were some of the places we visited.

Outcomes:

We reached home tired, but soaked with history, metaphor, faith, humility and a sense of awe for the vastness of this land and its richness. What made this experience extremely valuable and charged was the presence amongst our midst of a very knowledgeable guide, as well as the preparatory 6 months of getting ready to make this trip meaningful and efficient. Stories and narratives of mythology, which were so far only part of what we had heard, could now be associated and mapped with places and that could make the connection much deeper and poignant.



Guidance on college courses and career choices (Devi)

The discrimination against girls' education, although still present in India, is decreasing significantly. We see this positive trend in the Auroville bioregion as well. Girls want to go to college with the dream of earning a degree, and increasingly parents are also supportive of their daughters' endeavors. It is a good start, but they lack the guidance to understand the multitude of courses and career prospects with the result that they choose to pursue education in a field influenced by the choices of their friends or neighbors, only from a narrow set of possibilities that they are aware of like Engineering, B.Com, or nursing. The first-generation college aspirants

especially are left with no support from their uneducated parents. In general, there is less awareness about choosing a field that will match their interests and affinities. In Life Education Centre, the experience of guiding a girl student wanting to enter college last year brought awareness about the fact that students completely lack guidance and support regarding higher education. Many admission processes are completely online these days and students have no idea what courses and career opportunities exist. The girls in the Auroville bioregion who wish to go to college need to be given information on college courses and career choices to enable them to make informed decisions.

This year marked the beginning of “Yen Kalvi”, literally translated to “My Education”, a project of Life Education Centre, which will help and guide students in their aspirations for higher education. The first event under the project happened on April 15, 2016 when Mr. Jayakumar, professor of Computer Science and coordinator of the placement cell at Pondicherry University, was invited to LEC to offer guidance regarding college courses and career prospects. Around 50 girls and their parents attended the event. The speaker was engaging and shared a wealth of information about educational and employment opportunities in the country today. The participants were largely unaware of these opportunities. Yen Kalvi has hosted other sessions since then: one information session by AIAT (Auroville Institute of Applied Technology) about the different courses and corresponding career prospects in the Institute, and the other by the human resources manager from Aravind Eye Hospital regarding Nursing Assistant training. On an ongoing basis, young women role models from the bioregion, who have successfully completed their college degrees and are working or still undergoing their higher studies, are invited to offer motivational talks with the aim of inspiring other young women from the bioregion who want to pursue college education.

Outcomes:

The Yen Kalvi event brought to light the dire need for such a program to offer guidance and support for youth in the bioregion. This was affirmed by educators in Auroville and younger-generation Aurovilians from the bioregion who had faced similar challenges when they wanted to choose their career paths – some did so successfully while most could not.

We plan to hold another Yen Kalvi event giving information about college courses and career prospects in the next academic year (2016-17). We also plan for the project to include other activities, such as visiting various departments at Pondicherry University, and inviting a bank manager to give information about educational loans.



Health and Healing series (Devi)

One part of this series of workshops aimed at bringing awareness about the human body as a whole, and the systems involved in digestion, respiration, and circulation. The other part of the workshop was experiential in learning to use sounds that energize the body systems and experiencing the relaxing, energizing, and healing properties of music through experiencing rasa.

Participants watched an educational video that showed the various body systems and their functioning. They had earlier learned about these systems through body charts that gave them a 2-D idea whereas the video gave a 3-D perspective along with some animations to explain the

functions of each major system in the body. While this introduced them to the human body through a scientific approach, they were also introduced to the ancient Indian concepts of *Nadi* and *Chakra* that are associated with subtle energies in the body rather than the physical body. Students were taught to energize the seven chakras in the body through sound vibrations using seed syllables. They were also taught sound vibrations to energize internal organs through healing sounds in the Chinese energy system.

Students were explained the concept of *rasa* and *bhava* in Indian music – the word *rasa* means essence, *bhava* means expression and in Indian music (and generally in Indian art); *rasa* refers to the primary feeling that is evoked in a particular song or composition. Students listened to several pieces of music which had different moods, to understand that a singer or instrumentalist is able to transmit the mood through experiencing the *rasa* in herself and expressing what is felt. We talked about the importance of feeling the *rasa* while singing and listening, and how it helps to evoke deep-seated emotions within a person. Students were taught both new and familiar pieces of music to be experienced more deeply through the awareness of *rasa* underlying the piece.

Outcomes:

This series has always been an interesting experiment. The students took time to understand the concepts as they were very new to them. However, with consistent practice, they were able to do the exercises for energizing chakras much better. They also understood the difference between ‘just singing and listening’ and ‘singing and listening with the awareness of the *rasa*’, the latter requiring more attention and a deeper involvement from the whole being. Although it is certain that the workshops only serve as an introduction, and the students are able to grasp and experience the concepts on a very basic level, it was good to see that they are motivated to learn, practice and explore more.

Payanangal / Journeys revisited (Devi)

Payanangal / Journeys: Trajectories of Education and Empowerment among Young Women in the Auroville Bioregion is a book published by Life Education Centre in 2015. It is a compilation of life stories of current and past students of the Centre. As a follow-up to the publication, an event was planned this year to bring all the participants together and read their stories from the book back to them.

The gathering was organised in January 2016 and all the participants of *Payanangal* were invited. A Sunday was chosen to accommodate the convenience of the women who work during the week days. The gathering was well attended by all those women who participated in the project, except for one student who could not come because she had recently had a baby. The get-together in some ways became a reunion as many were meeting their old friends. The session was intense, with reading each story in English and translating it back to them in Tamil. Everyone was interested and keen to listen. The reading provided an additional opportunity for reflection to the participants.

The pseudonyms used in the book to maintain privacy of the participants were used in the readings, but participants guessed whose story was being read and there were smiles and cheer in the room. After reading and listening to 11 out of the 12 stories, each participant was gifted with a small lunch box in appreciation of participation and also a copy of the book which they

were very happy to receive. It was then time for lunch which was finely prepared by a couple of participants themselves who had come very early that day to do the cooking.

Outcomes:

The participants were happy for the opportunity and to listen to their stories. One of the participants said, "I always went to the bookshop at the Visitor's Center to see the book but could not afford to buy one. I am happy to receive a copy now." Another said, "I never thought I will see my story in print." Another participant: "I was amazed at myself for having come a long way in my life given my circumstances and my family background. It was encouraging to hear my story." The gathering and reading of the stories back to the participants brought the publication project to a meaningful closure.





Regular tailoring classes (Indirani)

Students received training in the following areas: stitching salwars and kurtas, blouses, different neck patterns, skirts, curtains, pillow covers, bags, embroidered pouches, juice bags, short tops (with or without sleeves), pants, and mosquito nets. Students were able to learn some of these easily while they found some skills hard to learn. But they were eager to get trained in skills that they were unfamiliar with, and wanted to try new items. Most had a fear that they might not cut the materials correctly and felt they need help and assistance.

Outcomes:

The students are able to cut and stitch their own and family members' clothes. They are yet to gain confidence in independently taking orders and completing them, especially when they are faced with the challenge of dealing with unfamiliar patterns and models.

Collective Embroidery on a single sari (Indirani)

The project aimed at learning skills through doing collective embroidery work. The classes started in mid-August 2015 and were done once a week for 33 weeks. The participants had the opportunity to express their personal stories through expression of feelings. The work was very individual, based on their unique stories and at the same time collective. The work helped the students learn to express their emotions creatively. They learned from and helped each other, shared about themselves without inhibitions, and understood others. Most women used forms from nature that indicated their closeness to nature. All participants were eager to do the work and enjoyed it. The two visiting students from Deepam who participated in this work, learned to expand their designs and forms by observing others.

Outcomes:

Students had the opportunity to experiment doing team work, learning from and supporting each other. Their involvement and understanding increased as they got deeper into the work. They are individually and collectively proud of their work and have a sense of accomplishment and sharing.





Reflections

The activities during the past year were conducted as planned and brought positive impacts for those students who participated. While the students consistently attending programs at Life Education Centre benefited, there were challenges in keeping the attendance stable. This may be due to the fact that more girls are doing their higher secondary and college education, a recent positive trend that is happening in the villages. This experience and the resulting realization that the focus of programs needs to change, to better serve the current needs of young women in the bioregion, will bring changes to the structure of programs at LEC.

One basic change that will happen is that we will classify programs under two tracks:

1. Programs under the umbrella “Yen Kalvi - My Education” that will support the needs of young women who pursue mainstream schooling and wish to pursue higher education.
2. Programs for young women who aren’t able to pursue college education but need vocational training to support themselves and their families.

Classifying the population that come to LEC can help support and cater to the individual needs of these two major groups that have emerged in the recent years. It will also bring better focus and efficiency to the programs. The basic aim of LEC – to help the young women develop conscious personalities – will continue to remain the same under both tracks. We will do considerable research and study in order to structure programs under the two tracks.

Conclusion

Life Education Centre has offered and continually learned from its programs and experiences of the last 25 years. The education and empowerment of young women in the bioregion continues to be crucial for the development of the individuals, families, bioregion as a whole and Auroville. With this need in mind, LEC would like to continue to offer programs that will best suit the current needs of young women in the bioregion. We are looking forward to have the new office building completed and functional from mid-July that will help us enormously to move forward.