

Julie Cunningham

I loved Aikiyam School from the very first drive in! Turning off the road from Kuilapalayam village towards Auroville, you pass old trees and banyans that shade cows resting, goats and the local motorbike rental shop. From the gates of the community of "New Creation", the school features the distinctive modern architecture of Auroville. In the school too, the architecture is distinct. Many classrooms are reminiscent of settled space saucers and in size and design, they express something of the nature of the school's culture; creative, unusual, playful, fully child-centered. Being a part of this interesting and fun educational community, where much effort is spent on making the children's learning experience creative, particularly in the early years, has been a delight. Volunteers are made very welcome and many of the teachers, children and volunteers eat together every school day with the children in the communal dining hall where lunch is on offer. Shankar the head of the school went out of his relaxed, but fully engaged, multi-tasking way to show me around and to share his knowledge and ideas about Tamil culture and Auroville, and about creating a bridge between the two in the school, and elsewhere.

My engagement with the school was initially through art therapy. I was working with Tia Pleiman in her integral art studio where children from the crèche upwards to about age 14 come to engage in many and varied creative art processes. Tia is an art therapist from New York, who realized her aims and practice to be very in alignment with the integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the guiding forces of Auroville. Tia has been forging a dynamic practice in the school. It was so interesting to work with her and also to replace her for about three weeks when she went to Orissa to work with tribal children in a Sri Aurobindo Ashram school there. Many adjectives apply to the experience of working with her - inspiring, fun, informative, stimulating and rewarding, personally and professionally.

The children are very delightful and also challenging of course! When any creative process is articulated well, they respond with enthusiasm and as they come from many impoverished families, they appreciate being able to work with art materials and particularly in the fun way Tia facilitates. Many of the class groups will come with their teachers so Tamil/English language issues are alleviated.

Through the art processes the children not only have fun, but nourish their spirits through creativity and meditation, reflection and storytelling and also expand their literacy and social skills such as collaboration and patience. For the younger grades, motor skills are also developed through art various activities.

I was also sharing an apartment with Tia and so there was ample time to discuss and reflect and cook up new processes. The Aikiyam Teachers' Residence where she and other teachers live was also a delight. One of the teachers organized a bonfire to celebrate Christmas, asking village children who attend the local Cultural Center to come. It was a sweet Christmas event.

It was a joy to be there and engaged with art therapy, and then later, as I saw it would help the school, to build the school a new website, which features videos some of the activities of the school.