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EDUCATION / Primary

OUR THREE primary schools, most of the expenses of which are borne by the Central Government under the NFE-2000 scheme, continue to thrive. If only the Government were more generous and somewhat more regular with its monetary help! Our teachers, whose competence and commitment would or, at least, should, shame a vast majority of their counterparts at Government-run schools, are expected to work for a comparative pittance, and our students, who do so well when they compete against their peers from these Government-run schools for admission to a high school, do not qualify for inclusion in the midday meal scheme.

We give below some cardinal particulars about these schools in a tabular form.

Particulars	Fatullyapur	Chandalati	Andharmanik	Total
1. Total students	160	145	150	455
Boys	71	73	69	213
Girls	89	72	81	242
2. Average attendance %	89.72	90.16	88.51	89.13
Boys	88.37	89.42	88.48	88.76
Girls	91.09	91.58	88.61	90.43
3. Total working days	232	232	249	238
4. No. of parents' meetings	3	4	4	11
Average attendance	78	64	65	69
5. Total home visits	583	444	1023	2050
Average per home	3.64	3.06	6.82	4.6
6. Central workshops				7
Average participation				14
7. Village workshops	3	3	4	10
Average participation	4	4	3	3.6
8. Teachers' monthly meetings				12
Average participation				12
9. Group visits				5
Average participation				12
10. Education organiser's visit	36	30	26	92
11. Fees collected (in Rs)	17,290	18,078	6330	39088

Going through these figures we asked ourselves a few questions and for answers we probed

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matters a little deeper. Whatever the average figures are, analysis of individual attendance records reveals that 227 of the to' 455 children were present on 90% or more days. The average for the total is brought down by the other half. A child brings a letter from his guardian if he has been absent and on going through these we find that around 37% of the absences were because the family had gone somewhere, 25% because the child was needed at home, 21 % because the child was ill, and 12% because the child did not wish to come to school. Rain and sup causes accounted for the remaining 5%. This was more or less the picture in each of the last three years. Now we do not think things can be changed too much from this situation, and so we had better be reconciled to the present attendance average, even though we would like this to go up by, say, another 5-6%.

A teacher works on more days in a year than his students. Monthly meetings of teachers and regular workshops are essential to maintain the standard of their performance in class and this year we spent 34 days on these. But, and this is important, we make it a point to hold these over weekends so that school sits as usual, even if it means that the teachers work on Saturday evening and Sunday too.

Apart from teachers' training the two other distinguishing features of our education programmes are classroom management and community involvement. In the first, our sustained efforts have started bearing fruit in many directions. Children right from Class I upwards no demonstrate better powers of observation which help their in their environment studies in which we go outside and beyond the book; they now show more creativity when writing or telling a story enquiries into local history continue to throw up lots of new or forgotten facts; in geography they go out on field trips to collect specimens c note characteristics for themselves; their use of and coordination between the senses are more developed.

There are of course areas where we are short of success. The children's handwriting continues to be bad, and we still do not know how to go about teaching them English effectively. Another old problem is the often huge gap between sections of students in the same class. We have tried many methods to remove this difference but none seems to work. In two areas our success has bred new problems. We do not know how to use or keep the enormous amount of data the children are collecting on local history, and how to reconcile the some times contradictory information they are bringing back. Also we can feel that extensive and intelligent use of the teaching-learning material that we produce has honed their analytical and various other skills, but how do we evaluate the quantum of increase?

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The constraint that bothers and frustrates us the most is that we have to follow syllabi decided by others, in our case the State Government. We feel we have gone quite some way in providing an alternative method of teaching, and our children have learnt to look at things somewhat differently, but we cannot change the contents of the books, to us often irrelevant. There is no satisfactory and viable solution to this in the prevailing circumstances, when our children's admission into Class V of the high schools depends totally on their intimate knowledge of the government prescribed text books.

Our efforts to involve the community at large have not been as sustained as they could have been and so have not borne much result. But we are always close to guardians, who in a village are mostly, parents. After seeing for two years how easily our, students get into Class V of local high schools, for places where they have to compete with a very large number of candidates from other schools, they are now assured that even if we teach in innovative and "strange" ways, the children do learn their stuff, and learn it better. The result of this has been that we now have to turn away more and more children. We hope parents understand that we are a small organization with severely limited resources and we cannot solve the problems of education, or the lack of it, in society. We are just trying to build a replicable model. We are ready to give all help to any individual or institution wishing to learn about our ideas and from our experience but that is all we can do.