RESEARCH LETTER No.1

STIMULATING A SENSE OF WONDER

All things are creations of the Universal Consciousness, Beauty also. The "experience" of the individual is his response or his awakening to the beauty which the Universal consciousness has placed in things; that beauty is not created by the individual consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo on the Experience of Beauty

This century has been perhaps the most significant in the history of the planet as we know it in the advent of artificially produced images. Since time immemorial people of all cultures have decorated their environment with abstract images and simulations of real life. The wall paintings in ancient Egypt and Greece and the cave paintings of early Neolithic man found at Lascaux in France testify to this primal tendency of mankind to adorn the vertical surfaces of their inner spaces, especially with scenes of daily life or significant elements of it. The turn of this century saw the beginning of a new era in terms of images with photography and cinematography progressively reaching into the lives of the masses. Today there are perhaps only a few remote civilisations on earth who have never seen a photograph or printed picture. In the more developed or first world countries there has been an upsurge in the number of newspapers, magazines and other such publications and their circulation has also reached a wider audience. Since the middle of this century technology has advanced rapidly and has drastically effected the quality of reproduction in terms of colour. We are now able to see landscapes and close ups of life in corners of the world most of us will never visit and expand our appreciation of the beauty, diversity and wonder of the living organism of the earth of which we are a part.

In education the walls of the classroom reflect the life of the class. Whatever is up on the walls is there for everybody to see and learn from. We are able to learn from each other by displaying the work all the students have done on a given exercise or theme. The student is then able to assess his/her own work and style in relation to others. These things which come and go from the shared space attract attention and can stimulate thought or ideas. Very often the eyes of a student can wander to a wall and rest upon an image there when the teacher is reading or when they are thinking about another matter. These pictures, in a subtle sense, can give energy, can stimulate, inspire or simply refresh. The arrangement and mixture of different items on display can aid or hinder concentration and are critical in creating a learning environment. Looking at ways to best use the wall and display spaces in classrooms is an important aspect of a teacher's work. Simplicity and clarity are the guiding principles to be borne in mind in order to be effective at any level, and the need for these qualities becomes more imperative as the subject becomes more complex.

Looking around Auroville schools gives the impression that this is well known and the walls can be telling of the age of the students or the purpose of the room. Displays are being utilised in common spaces where the entire school can benefit, as well as in individual classrooms reflecting and uniting the work of the group. The remainder of this research letter focuses on how some SAIIER units have used displays this year incorporating photographic images.
The double anniversary of India's Independence and the 125th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo inspired two major displays this year. The first was a photo exhibition on Sri Aurobindo's life arranged for students and staff of Transition school. The second was an exhibition on the advent of Auroville and a biography of Sri Aurobindo's life and his patriotic writing relating to India. The latter was shown in Delhi and later brought home to Auroville and shared here. A slide show and lecture was given alongside a more permanent display which was also accompanied by a recorded commentary. Spectators were able to explore the vertical and horizontal space, with some items displayed on low tables and some on boards or walls. An exhibition in late October on Rome and Ancient India transformed the CIC into a miniature museum with an exquisitely put together and informative display. Other units, such as the Laboratory of Evolution, made best use of the noticeboard outside the Lab and the tables in the first room around which there are chairs and cushions, making it inviting for people to sit and browse at texts relevant to current community issues, such as Sri Aurobindo and India.

"The human soul needs actual beauty more than bread"
W.B. Yeats
Research into the composition and use of displays for pre-primary children (below the age of six) is being carried out by two researchers, Claire and Astha. They work every morning in an old building near the Kindergarten and put up the new displays using photo-pictures from magazines, coloured paper, cloth and other items related to the theme, in the creche and kindergarten on alternate Saturdays in preparation for the coming Monday. The displays are changed each fortnight. The displays were initiated to provide an atmosphere in the entrance hall of the Kindergarten, a common space shared by staff, students and parents. The idea was to create something eye-catching and attractive so that the very first thing to be seen on entering the kindergarten engages the mind immediately and provokes curiosity and interest. Having something new to explore contributes to the atmosphere of continuous learning and gives young children some idea of how much there is to see in the world. It gives a momentum and dynamism to the building which otherwise remains the more or less the same and thus provides stability and security. The entrance hall is also the place where all the students gather to sing and to concentrate and to make flower kolams, which often take a shape that follows the theme. Many of the rooms open out onto this hall which is at the heart of Kindergarten life.

The creche children have grown accustomed to the surprise Monday mornings hold in store for them and look at the displays together with the teachers identifying the objects and actions depicted. This has proven to be a valuable tool for language development and vocabulary building. Children in the Creche and the Kindergarten speak a variety of languages at home and this is for many the only opportunity to expand their vocabulary in a second or third language and to find a common language with which they can communicate with their peers. At present there is a high number of children in the creche whose parents know little or no English, the common language of India and the main teaching medium in Auroville. For many of these children the creche is the only place where they are exposed to English. The pictures are placed around the room at a low level which can be seen by children when sitting on the floor and actively engaged in play, the singlemost important way of learning and assimilating experience at this age level. Having identified items in the pictures the children have two weeks in which the pictures continually trigger their memory and reinforce their learning of words.

The kindergarten's display is somewhat more sophisticated and is integrated into the classroom activities by the teachers. Here too, small displays in each classroom carry the topic into the group activities and keep it in the consciousness so that the children can continue to think about it and absorb it at a deeper level than the surface mind. The theme of the display becomes a common thread in Kindergarten life for the time period it is up, differently interpreted by each teacher with their group as appropriate to the age of the children. Photo collages or paintings on the theme are often made by the children and put up alongside the miniature displays in the classrooms. In this way children begin to learn by example from the role models provided. By having a go at making a display they also start to look into the process and go some way towards appreciating the sequence of steps and ingredients that go into making something like a display, rather than taking it for granted. This probing into how
things are made and what they are made of is another way of stimulating a sense of wonder. The aesthetic element stimulates right brain hemisphere activity and the creative imagination, whilst the investigation it invites provokes looking into the workings of the displays and their contents and stimulates a questioning, interrogative approach and rational left hemisphere thinking. The more a child looks at a display, the more details he/she identifies, the more correspondences and associations within the display and with their lives, the deeper their interest and awareness. The approach being cultivated is one of unending education, whereby the child's whole attitude and outlook on life is one of actively engaging with the world around and realising that each time one looks closer, greater detail can be observed. Some of the photographs magnify, for example, insects or leaves and parts of them, so that, with an inquiring mind, a child can lay the foundations in thinking for what might later flourish into a scientific approach and an aesthetic appreciation.

The researchers who started the displays intended initially to assist the teachers by providing material for introducing concepts such as colour, number, shape, etc. but soon realised that although their particular approach and the medium of display was quite different, there is already an abundance of children's literature teaching the same. Looking at the exquisite images in a collection of nature magazines from Italy, they realised that they had an opportunity to show what most children's literature does not, centred as it is upon classic themes such as "my body, my family, my home" etc. The researchers realised that they could show things the children may not otherwise see and had the potential to introduce concepts with a unique perspective that could widen the children's perception to incorporate a world view. The nature magazines gave just the kind of material to create displays that could instigate a global perspective or at least broaden the children's horizons and offer a fresh angle on the known.

Since the displays started a number of people have given or loaned magazines from which pictures have been extracted and filed by subject for later use. Occasionally images are reused to expound a different theme. From time to time artists come to draw diagrams or copy pictures from books. A careful selection is made from these magazines so that advertising photos which have been deliberately set up to convey something and therefore very often have something unnatural about them are not included. The images are selected for the quality with which they convey their subject and bearing in mind that the overall aim of the display is to help the children to learn through a contact with the beauty of the world as it is without distortion.

Each display is centred around a theme or topic. Thematic teaching is especially useful at this age level for building associative networks and increasing the child's capacity to understand the relationships between things. The displays act as a teaching tool for expanding vocabulary and deepening children's comprehension of language and their possibilities of expression. It helps the develop the concept of likeness and similarity and the understanding of integrated wholes. The them of fire was timed in conjunction with Deepavali which helped the children see meaning in the festivities and linked their learning to the organic flow of their lives. In this way they were able to put a name to some of the things they were interacting with. Under
the theme of fire pictures were shown of fires indoors and outside, of candles and of fireworks. The children lit some candles in front of the display with the teachers and thus vivifies the images.

Theories of memory and learning propose that the more associations we have for a word the more useful it becomes to us, as the number of associations strengthens it in our memory and makes it easier to use in communication. For this reason the diversity of images on one theme enhances the child's chances of integrating words into their vocabulary.

The themes chosen range from the simple concrete themes such as lotuses or birds to more abstract links such as colour i.e. blue, red, and into more general themes which expand thinking to embrace broader concepts, such as night flying in the sky. Themes are chosen in part due to the possibilities with the material available. The way in which the researchers compose and interpret a theme can highlight certain aspects of a theme, but the teacher is free to take up the theme in any number of ways, gearing it to the level of the children in the group. Having explored some of the elementary concepts the researchers now feel that there is greater utility in developing themes that offer a different perspective not easily found in books. In this way the atmosphere and experience created will be something special and unique for the children of the Creche and Kindergarten.

There is a strong feeling that the display is a well loved and vitally important aspect of the kindergarten's life. It creates an atmosphere and provides a linking factor between all the students and teachers for some time as they investigate and explore together. More recently some of the classrooms have a small display also along the same theme on their walls. Teachers are informed a fortnight in advance and have a little time to prepare activities which follow the theme. The theme gives added meaning and purpose to outings and visits and it has been found that the children have a far richer experience having this unity in their activities, besides the regular schedule of lessons.

To illustrate how this is done some examples are cited below. When the theme was horses a group visited the pony farm and on another day Bas and Bettina brought two horses and led the children up and down riding on them. In this display, as is often the case, the wall was only one aspect an interactive display created by the use of material as a background and other items of relevance - i.e. a saddle, helmet, straw etc. The touching, feeling, smelling aspects accompanying the purely visual also reinforce the learning process. Theories suggest that the more senses stimulated in an experience strengthen the effect in the memory, which in turn makes the material more accessible and by use, more meaningful. The critical factor in our research is to stimulate the sixth, or psychic sense by giving an experience of beauty and by stimulating a sense of wonder. When a child awakens to the beauty of the world it has yet not come into contact with or seen in that particular way a natural curiosity is aroused and along with it a thirst to learn, explore and discover.
To the children and the staff at the kindergarten the display is many things. It provides the theme - the peg to hang other information on - as Gestalt theorists say. It provides a focal point in the common space and a link between all the children, whatever their age or group and it brings them into contact with things they might otherwise not see. It is like a modern museum installed every two weeks exploring different topics, but beyond that it is another facet of Kindergarten/Creche and Auroville life.

From the list of themes covered so far (see below) one can see that nature, colours, shapes, activities, introducing verbs) such as jumping, places and processes are features. These provide what can be seen as the very beginning of subjects such as geography, biology, mathematics, art, languages etc. At this stage however, the theme sets off discussion and exploration in many different ways. The child's learning experience has not yet been divided and categorised into separate subject areas and one can question the virtue of this later in schooling. Instead of transmitting certain concepts and skills the children approach universal themes with the depth or diversity appropriate for their stage of development. In this way they are able to see the infinite potential for learning in all areas of life. This holistic approach is the seed of an integral and unending education. The theme could be a superficially simple as "red" and yet provoke language, mathematics, science etc. depending upon the interest of the children and the creativity of the teachers to respond to that or to stimulate it. Themes such as from the field to the plate show the process of growing from seeds into mature plants, harvesting, processing, purchasing, cooking and eating. Such themes aim to open the child to things in everyday life which may be somewhat taken for granted and instill an awareness of lifecycles, systems and processes.

DISPLAY THEMES

lotus   birds
boats   circles
desert   hands
blue    on heads
spots & stripes   rivers
green   roads
jumping   the sea
yellow   night
flying in the sky   pink
houses & castles   forests
triangles & squares   insects
islands   horses
playing outside   wood
Himalayas   fire
From the field to the plate  

"Le beau est aussi utile que l'utile. Plus peut-être."
"The beautiful is as useful as the useful. Perhaps more so."
Victor Hugo - Les Miserables