



L'avenir... the future

an Integral Education preschool

An Overview

2001-02

One year is almost over since L'Avenir began on 4th April, 2001, as a learning centre for 2-4 year olds. It is not only a learning centre for children, but for the teachers too - as it provides a ground for training, research and innovation.

How can Integral Education be practised along with academic aims - this has often been a question. This Overview provides a few insights into how we have attempted it at L'Avenir with 2-4 year olds.

Areas of Focus:

MENTAL

DEVELOPMENT OF MENTAL FACULTIES:

At L'avenir, our focus is on training the mental faculties of the child, i.e. help him/her develop his/her innate capacities of Concentration, Observation, Reasoning, Imagination, Judgment, Memory. This is done through various activities, games and exercises. As you read the following, please keep in mind the following:

- The activities might be the same or different to what is done normally. It is the aim that we have in front of us (i.e. our intention in doing the activity and during the activity) and the way it is done (i.e. our approach and our attitude during the activity), that makes it 'super-normal'.
- The training and unfoldment of each of these faculties happens at various stages in different ways, to different degrees of complexity. It is a life-long process. With this age group, the work is more in the nature of providing experiences and atmospheres, support structures that nurture the faculties, as opposed to stunting them early in life – as is the normal practice, through an overload of information and adult norms, through an underestimation of a child's abilities and potential, through an active (even if at times 'good-intentioned' and 'ignorant') discouragement of the child's own uniqueness of mind and thinking abilities, in the interests of a uniform education and towing the line rather than thinking originally or innovating.

Concentration

The children have a natural ability to concentrate upon whatever interests them. However, as their vital is excited easily, the concentration tends to move quickly to different things. Thus, at this stage, a degree of stability and silence – both in the vital and the mind is introduced. This is done through:

- Certain structures put in place gently but firmly – such as, group activities wherein all must participate at least for some time before moving on to individual pursuits.
- Creating an atmosphere of quiet calm that rests the children and allows them to focus in peace over whatever they are busy with.
- Certain ground rules to ensure that the children do not disturb each other – these are consciously observed by the facilitators, so as to allow the children to develop a certain trust in the learning environment and group dynamics.
- Help and guidance when required. The facilitators make a conscious effort to be sensitive to the needs of the children – when is it best to let them try despite difficulty, when is it important for the facilitator to step in or else the child will be too frustrated and will lose interest, perhaps for a long time.
- An atmosphere of love, trust, fun. This helps the children to be at ease and open up and let their natural abilities shine.

Observation

The observation capacity of these children is remarkable. It seems that nothing escapes their eye or ears. They are quick to catch every word that is spoken, no matter in which corner of the room or around them, to them or to someone else. It took us time and effort to identify each child's belongings, left back clothes, but the children effortlessly notice and register in their minds all this information. They immediately remark any change in shoes, bottles, bags, handkerchiefs, socks, hairstyles, trinkets, tiffin boxes etc. – even without any special mention of these. The areas where their observation needs training is in its minuteness, i.e. to observe the details and register these as well. This is where a growing vocabulary and concepts of colours, shapes etc. help. For these help the children to give a name to what they observe and recognise similarities and differences in what they see. Other areas where further training is needed are those of observing through the other senses as well, i.e. smells, textures, tastes. Some of the activities that we have used are:

- Comparing and Contrasting. For instance, drawing the attention of the children to a particular bottle or jacket or any object of theirs and praising it and

remarking on how similar or how different it is from another child's bottle or jacket. Asking the children to point out the smaller or the larger one, the colours on each and so on. Guiding them from a casual observation to a detailed one, step by step.

- Being in Nature and Outdoors. Whether during physical culture time in the morning, or at the swings, or while eating tiffin outdoors, or even driving through the farm on the way to L'avenir, as well as on the roads – there is so much to observe. Birds – parrots, peacocks, doves, mynahs, crows, babblers, and many others; Squirrels who are our constant companions as we eat; Horses who we say hullo to many times during the day and who are irresistibly drawn to children; Trees and how they sway in the breeze and the sounds they make; Bees and Butterflies on the flowers; Ants in the grass and on the mats; Fish in the aquarium; all the hidden Lions and other deadly animals in the shrubs and thickets around that are like dense forests for these children – endless variety of natural life that surrounds us, being situated in the farm. And on the roads, all the shops that we pass by, the stray animals, the varieties of cars and vehicles that zip past, the little dramas that we drive by daily. All these become occasions for sharings, stories, songs, movement, and sometimes, stillness – for you have to be very quiet to observe the horses or the birds.
- Naming experiences, i.e. consciously speaking about the objects we handle with children (while handling these for some work, and not as a mere activity) in terms of texture or shape or size etc. For instance, remarking on a child's jersey, touching it and saying how soft it is; touching some other garment and remarking on its roughness, and so on.
- Story books, Flash cards, Puzzles etc. These are of course used for many purposes. But in order to develop Observation there is an added emphasis on demonstration. The finger very consciously points to certain objects in the story-picture book and the children's eyes follow; the flash cards are held up one by one and each child allowed to observe and register – even speak about other things not necessarily related to the concept being taught. For instance, the flash card that shows a desert as the home of camel, has only one tree on it and the children have picked up the idea that a desert has only one tree, i.e. very few trees, without it being verbalised by the facilitator. Puzzles too are demonstrated once and then the children try these out on their own. When they are stuck, help is again provided in the form of a semi or quasi demonstration, leaving scope for the child to experiment as well.

Reasoning

Normally it is thought that such young children cannot respond to reasoning, nor can they reason out things. However, this is not the case. In fact, it is very important to explain things to children with proper reasons, rather than just setting a list of do's and don'ts before them which they must follow just because the adults say so. Also, it is important to tell them the true reasons rather than made up ones because, contrary to popular belief, the children are actually capable of understanding what is true. They might not understand intellectually, but their heart knows, can sense the truth of what you are saying and it responds to that.

Secondly, we have found that the children are quite logical in their thinking. In most cases, it is reasoning based on observation of outer phenomena, but their ability to apply that knowledge gained from observation, in a real life situation is remarkable – for instance, caught in a traffic jam once, we asked the children in the van, what if the van could become a helicopter and just take off over the jam. We asked them what would the van need in that case. They answered: Fan. Where would that fan be? On top. And what if the van were to become a plane, what would it need? Wings. And fan too – but underneath. And do the plane and the helicopter take off in the same way? No. The plane needs space.

We have even seen instances of reasoning based on self-observation. For example, when asked where he got his answers from, the child replied, from my mind (dimaag se). For another thing he said that his heart (dil) had told him so. When we asked him further, he said that sometimes his dimaag told him things, sometimes his dil, but both were inside only (par dono andar hi hain na).

Some of the measures that we have consciously adopted to train their reasoning are:

- Problem Solving. During a conversation or a drive or a walk, in any planned or unplanned situation, we engage them in responding to 'why' and 'what can be done'. For instance, if a child is absent, we wonder aloud, why she has not come. The children come up with answers based on their own experience or their imagination.
- Wooden block puzzles. These are a very good means for helping children perceive patterns, make connections and progress to a small degree of abstract thinking. One can see that initially it is trial and error, but even here one sees some children struggling with the pieces and turning them around repeatedly, while some others are doing the same thing in their heads, and after a moment of watching the pieces quietly, they suddenly put the right one in place. It is amazing to see the way these things happen.

- Stories. More than stories it is the way of telling the stories that encourages reasoning. As we show them the picture books or read a story or make up one and narrate, we pause in between and ask them 'why do they think that happened', 'why did he behave like that' etc. We encourage them to come up with at least two-three different reasons. This is done both to develop a degree of richness in their thinking as well as flexibility – that there need not be only one correct answer to a question.
- Explaining 'Why'. Instead of simply imposing the ground-rules, we make the effort to explain the 'why' of each rule from time to time. We find that often the children themselves explain the rule – not merely cite the rule but explain the reason as well – to another child if he/she is stepping beyond it.
- Asking 'Why'. Similarly, when a child wishes to do a particular thing or refuses to do something, we generally ask her 'why' and try to make the child aware of her reasons as well as ourselves understand these before deciding on a course of action. Here, it is very important that the relationship between the facilitators and the children is one of trust, love and respect. If the child is afraid of the facilitator or the consequences, and therefore wants to pretend or please or not acknowledge, it becomes necessary to first overcome that.

Imagination

This faculty operates at two levels. One is by giving shape to an idea, an image in the mind, a creative impulse. The second is the ability to contact the future, that which is going to be and let that manifest in one's life. In a certain sense, the young children are naturally in touch with the future – though not mentally – and it is that which fills them with confidence, hope and trust in life, in themselves, in the people around them. Their minds still have to develop more before they can form a mental image of their own potential and their future. But at the first level, there are a few activities that we do to help develop the Imagination:

- Building blocks. We have a set of wooden blocks especially designed and manufactured for this age group. The various sizes and shapes, as well as the child friendly material and the simple beauty of the blocks are a great attraction for the children and we have seen them busy with these for long stretches of time, creating veritable empires and very interesting structures on their own. It is interesting to witness the process and to chip in with a question or two, to discover their visualisation of the activity going on in that empire (a hotel building, for instance).

- Drawing and Painting. The children love doodling or filling up the entire paper with colour. At times they tell us what they are making and we write this down next to the image they have drawn. Sometimes it also means the destruction (in our eyes) of a beautiful drawing – a child has drawn a beautiful sun and then suddenly we find him covering it all up with dark blue or black and it is no longer visible. His answer: Clouds.
- Role play, Stories, Songs. Often we create songs or adapt an existing song to an ongoing situation. For instance, if someone is crying, we use a line from one of the rhymes and then add words applicable to the crying child, sung to the same tune. Or we include all the children in a song being sung, by incorporating some action that each child is doing within the song. The children enjoy this. Recently we have found that some of them have started doing this on their own. A child had started crying. One of us just sang a line from a rhyme: 'Rone ki koi baat nahin hai chanda mama ayega, Chanda mama dharti pe aa kar...' and suddenly we heard another child joining in on her own, singing: 'S ko pyar karega' (S being the name of the crying child) – in perfect tune.
- Atmosphere of Freedom. This is of course, an important pre-requisite to develop Imagination. A scope to experiment. Then many things happen that are not planned from our side, but initiated by the children themselves. For instance, in the playground, there are small planks of wood and plastic drums that the children can roll and lift on their own. These are normally used for balancing (placing the plank atop two drums kept at a distance from each other, and crossing over). We find children creating their own equipment at times – combining these planks or drums with other play stations and coming up with something new.

Judgment

The faculty of Discernment is still in the future for these young ones. But a beginning is made through activities that demand Estimation. It is more at the physical level as yet than at the psychological level.

§ Estimation. Through aiming games, such as putting a ball through a tyre that is hanging from a rope, or jumping down from a height, onto a place marked out in the ground. Long jump and high jump too involve the estimation skills.

Memory

This is one area that is most emphasised in most schools today. However, the emphasis is on rote learning, cramming up – and for how long we retain that information (once we are through with the examinations), we all have experienced! Memory is definitely important but this too works at various levels and a different approach is needed for each level. For instance, the physical memory requires repetition, but the mental memory requires experience and involvement based on interest and concentration, not cramming. The children pick up songs and rhymes quite easily as they enjoy the rhythm, the music. Being keen listeners and observers, they pick up words and expressions too very quickly. No cramming is needed. Repeated experience or exposure helps, for instance, to shapes, numbers, alphabets, etc. But cramming is not needed.

- **Physical Culture.** This is a very good means for training the physical memory in a constructive way. Repeated attempts at climbing the rope ladder or jumping from a height etc. bring the child to a certain level of confidence and courage, as well as agility. Then the child is absent for a few days and we see that he has lost some of the ground covered and we have to begin again from a level below. The body has to forget fear. But with a gap in practice, the fear tends to return to some extent, and that asks for repeated practice supported by encouragement and positive messages from the facilitators. At this stage, physical culture and regularity to develop various habits in the body are very important.
- **Interest, Concentration, Experience.** These three form our focus rather than cramming.
- **Stories, Rhymes, Flash Cards.** These involve the children's interest and engage more than one sense, making learning experiential for them as they visualise, identify, enact the characters in the song or story. Pausing in the right place and asking them to recall the names or the incidents or other minor details, helps them to fix it in their minds. The same procedure is followed with flash cards which are shown to them repeatedly, as means to build up their vocabulary or introduce certain concepts.

INFORMATION:

The emphasis with the 2-3 year olds has been on Vocabulary and identification of sounds, colours, shapes, sizes. With the 3-4 year olds, in addition, recognition of alphabets has formed an important focus. Actually there is no sharp distinction between information and faculty development for one is the means for the other. All conversations with the children, whether in the van or in the playground, on the

swings, or during tiffin time, or while going over the books – all are full of information as for these young children each fact is of supreme interest. Their ears pick up every new word, every nuance of conversation around them. In fact, we have to be careful to check our own information level and accuracy of facts. For instance, as we pass by the Maruti factory, we see various structures that have been designed for loading and off-loading of cars. The children want to know what these are called. Do we know? As their interest is keen, this is the right moment to supply them with the right word or if we hear them naming it wrongly, to correct them. Each and every car on the road has to be named, classified, each and every vendor described.

The picture books at L’Avenir have introduced the children to different vehicles, vegetables, fruit, shapes, colours, animals and birds. They have also been introduced to what the babies and homes of certain animals are called, such as, lion-cub-den, rabbit-bunny rabbit-burrow, and so on.

VITAL

DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER:

This is a major focus at L’Avenir through all our interactions and activities with the children. Each child is a unique individual, with her own particular strengths and weaknesses. One child might be extremely courageous but be prone to bouts of aggression. Another might be very loving but given to fits of anger. Insecurity, fear, anger, possessiveness, need for attention, manipulation, hesitation to acknowledge a mistake, bullying – all these traits of human nature are present in these little ones too. But very transparently, for the young children are like flowers and they do not hide. Whatever is inside is shown openly. The noble traits of humanity – generosity, concern for the other, sympathy, honesty, frankness, love, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, confidence, trust, courage – these are present in them to a greater degree than in adults, for the simple reason that their mind has not yet learnt to divide and deceive. Therefore, it is a great opportunity to work on character development at such an early age. How do we do it?

- Building up a relationship of love and trust between the teacher and the child. It is our conscious endeavour to nurture such a relationship and to strengthen it day by day. This demands that we do not betray the child’s trust in even the smallest way – such as, promising something and not doing it, or soothing the child with empty words that we do not follow up in action. Love and trust do not mean that we are never firm with the child. When required, firmness is exercised. But our endeavour is to do it without anger – but after explaining to the child the need for such an action. The key to this equation is treating the child with the

same respect as one treats an adult with whom one builds up a good relationship. To understand that the child, though small in his years and physical being, is capable of understanding deepest truths and explanations rather than being fobbed off with childish simplifications. For the team of teachers at L'Avenir, it is a joy to work with children – it is something they love and this transmits to the children. The children know that they are important to their teachers, as individuals, they are not only students, but also companions and playmates.

- Encouraging self-reflection. When a child does something wrong, the normal tendency is to lecture him or inform him of the do's and don'ts or exhort him to be a good boy. At times we too fall into this trap for it is deeply ingrained in all of us, as this is how most of us were brought up. But such an approach hardly ever helps anyone to overcome weaknesses in their character. They might cover it up with a nice code of social behaviour but the impulses of negative behaviour do not go away, and trouble us in later life, in more subtle and menacing ways. At L'Avenir, our attempt is to understand why the child behaves in a particular fashion. Why does he hit? Why does he attempt to hide a wrong-doing? Why does he cry? and so on. It is also very important to help the child understand the same. So generally if such a thing happens, we go up to the child and ask him why he is doing that. This asking too has to be done in a way that is non-threatening, sensitive to what the child's state is at that moment. At times the child is able to explain, at other times he cannot do so for he too does not know. But repeated experiences like this, help him become aware, help him acquire a distance from his own action. We also reinforce his positive behaviour (that contradicts his earlier action), through praise, a smile or a pat, and verbalise the fact that he is not always negative, but only at times. It is important for the child not to identify himself with the negativity – therefore, it is important to understand that I am not bad but I do bad things at times. Why do I do them, what pushes me to it? This understanding comes next.
- Physical Education is a very good means to build up various qualities in the character, such as Courage, Cooperation, Enthusiasm, Ability to overcome pain, Leadership, Confidence, Perseverance. At L'Avenir the children spend 30-40% of their time in physical education, where the teachers are aware of its potential for educating the vital.
- Individual attention. Each child, his abilities, his needs, his limitations – these are observed and recorded in the teacher's consciousness as well as on paper, and through discussions with the parents as well as other teachers. These guide our approach and interaction, the points that we emphasise while doing similar or

same activities with different children. Depending on the areas of each one's growth, our emphasis changes with each child. Thus, while to one child the teacher will lend a helping hand while balancing or jumping for he needs to gain confidence that he can do it, with another she will cajole or be firm and try hard to make him overcome his fear or laziness which makes him hesitate even though he can do it.

SOCIALISATION & GROUP SKILLS:

For most of these young children, it was their first year in school, hence, socialisation meant just agreeing to be with each other, accepting the group entity, accepting to be a part of a larger unit, sharing space, sharing things, sharing experiences, and then forming friendships. Here it has been a mix of ground rules and letting them sort out things on their own. The teachers step in only if things seem to be getting out of hand. Each little situation – who will sit next to the window seat in the van, who will get onto the swing first, who will wash hands first at the washbasin, who will pick up which book to read, who will play which instrument at music time... the list is endless – each of these situations are good opportunities to exercise group skills. Conflict resolution is a big term but these little children are learning the basics early! The following are the important things to bear in mind and apply in this case:

- Making use of the opportunities life brings. We do not need to create special situations to train these skills in the young ones. There are enough opportunities. Instead of resolving everything for them, we encourage the children to find a solution themselves – sometimes with our mediation, sometimes without it. And we consider this to be a part of the curriculum – an important part too. Therefore, we spend time on it and let the children take time over it, instead of hurrying on to the next thing or activity on our list.
- Inculcating self-discipline. Yes, outer discipline does exist and needs to exist for a long time. But we are aware that this is not the final answer. The more the children learn to decide their own rules, regulate their own behaviour, the better it is. We find that when the children have understood why a certain rule is needed or why a certain social behaviour is important, they themselves remind each other of it – with explanations! At times they remind us if we step out of the limit too.
- Group work. Certain activities are done in a group. For some time at least, the children are asked to remain in a group before diverging into their own areas of interest. So, for instance, when the children are sitting around the table with drawing sheets in front of them, one of us goes around holding out the bowl of

crayons. Each child has an empty bowl and they can take as many colours as they like from the main bowl, but only two times. Some children dip both their hands into the bowl and fill them with crayons – twice, others barely manage to get a grip on 4-5 crayons at a time, neither do they try to fill their bowl full. Thus, while each child is constrained by the limit two, the individual variations are allowed without any comment from the teacher, as it does not create any unease in any of the children involved. The emphasis in group skills and socialisation is not on uniformity, but on harmony based on individual uniqueness.

REFINEMENT OF THE SENSES:

- Exposure is the main key to sensorial training. We try and expose the child to different sounds, textures, tastes, smells, sights. We try to inculcate a certain silence that allows the senses to take in the information without agitation or distraction. We try and inculcate precision in naming the impression this information makes on us. The children have a very sharp hearing. But it needs to be trained to detect direction. They are keen observers but their eye needs to be trained to discern tiny movements, hidden objects, merging backgrounds. The other senses need a greater work than these two. This area needs much more work.
- Beauty... a love for beauty, an eye for beauty, appreciation of beauty – not only in the physical realm, but also in emotions, language, voice, tone, expressions, thoughts. This is one of the key focuses at L’Avenir. The other areas already discussed (training of the mental faculties and character) contribute to the development of the aesthetic sense. Any beautiful act by the child, any beautiful expression, anything that is beautiful in her clothes or hair or belongings – at all levels, this is encouraged, remarked upon, made special by the teacher’s attention and appreciation. The same applies to things around us, in nature. Taking time on the way in to L’Avenir, to stop the van and look at the horses or the peacocks on the way, taking time to lie down under a tree where the parrots have made their home and listening to their calls, taking care not to disturb them so that we can catch a glimpse as they fly in or out – all these are part of this same process. Creating a learning environment that is clean, neat, aesthetically organised, full of natural beauty – this too is done consciously.
- For refinement of the senses, art in various forms (music, dance, painting, clay, gardening) is a very good means. Here too, we have made a beginning – but much more needs to be done.

PHYSICAL

PHYSICAL CULTURE:

A very important component of the children's training is their physical culture. Body, as the Mother explains, is a being of habits and very difficult to change later on in life. Thus, one has to begin very early with physical education – not later, as many believe. At L'Avenir, a great emphasis is laid on physical education. Special equipment and apparatus have been designed and created so that the children can exercise their muscles, develop strength, stamina, agility, balance, coordination – balancing beam, rope ladder, monkey bar, climbing net, jumping stations, ropes and tyres to hang from and swing. In each of these, variations are introduced periodically so that the children move from easy to difficult gradually. A record is maintained of each individual child's progress in each of the activities separately, i.e. how far and with what amount of help can child A climb up the rope ladder, how does she cross the monkey bar, is she able to cross the balancing beam on her own, and so on; and then similarly for child B and C and D. Correction of especially bad posture while walking or running too has received special attention. What are the main features of Physical culture at this stage?

- Systematic and regular training. Our endeavour is to keep repeating a particular exercise or activity with the child till he acquires a certain mastery. We have seen that a break in this routine affects adversely. The variation is introduced through our approach. Sometimes we do it as a group exercise, sometimes as part of a journey, sometimes as part of another action or game. For instance, to tell children to climb the net everyday can become constraining. We are trying to look for some birds and the children are asked to climb the net to see better, as they will be nearer the tree. Similarly, to exercise various parts of the body, to stand in a circle and do routine exercises can work a few times but not always. So some days, we do it through play acting – we are the birds or waves or trees swaying in the wind and we imitate the movements, taking care to involve different parts of the body. But the endeavour is to be regular and systematic – to introduce a greater level of complexity or difficulty when the child seems ready.
- Developing Strength, Stamina, Agility, Balance, Coordination, Flexibility. Currently these are the main capacities of the physical that we are focusing on with this age group. Some work is also done on developing a healthy attitude towards injury and pain.

- Nurturing Enthusiasm, Adventure, Fearlessness, Confidence. While doing the various physical activities with the children, our focus is on nurturing these qualities as being foundational both for physical and vital education.

CARE OF ONESELF, THE MATERIALS & THE ENVIRONMENT:

- Hygiene has formed an important part of our work with the children. Brushing of teeth, clipping of nails, cleaning of ears, using the handkerchief or a tissue to wipe the nose – all this has received attention on a regular basis.
- Keeping things back in their proper place – be it slippers or shoes as they take these off to come into the classroom, or bags and bottles, or the books, blocks, puzzles, toys after they have used them – we encourage children to help organise the work area and leave it clean and tidy after use, and especially to keep back the things they have used themselves.
- Taking care of the environment – keeping it clean, throwing the wrappers and waste into the dustbin, treating the plants and flowers with care – these attitudes too are encouraged consciously.

PSYCHIC

MOVEMENT TOWARDS PROGRESS:

Young children have a natural urge to grow, to learn, to progress, to do things well, to become better than what they are. They show this in various ways – in their desire to imitate those they hero-worship, in their impatience to become big, tall and strong, in their enthusiasm to learn and master new skills. But more than anything else, it is their eyes that sparkle with an inner glow, their skin that reflects the freshness of flowers, their smile which spreads its joy to everyone, their movements which are full of energy – it is these and an indefinable sense of something in touch with worlds beyond our ken that epitomises this urge. A child fills one with wonder and beauty just by being there. To retain this through life as one grows and to nurture it further as the mind gains ascendance, this is a task worthy of true education. This is our endeavour at L’Avenir.

SENSE OF INNER UNEASE:

If things are not in harmony, whether within themselves or around them, the children experience an inner sense of unease. This unease expresses itself in various ways. The energy of the child fades, the light in his eyes dims, the child may even fall ill or behave in ways not normal to him. At another level, whenever the child does

something that is not in harmony with his own nobility, he experiences an unease. This is beyond morals or social norms. It just is. A spontaneous response arising from the psychic being (the chaitya purusha, the soul). It demands great sensitivity, care and sincerity on the part of the adult (parent or teacher) to nurture this flame in the child and not to cover it up with morality or justifications or reasoning. This inner unease is a sure guide for character development, for taking the right decision in life. To be sensitive to this aspect in each child and to nurture it consciously, this is our aspiration. It demands self-preparation on our part too and this too is our endeavour.