



2017 Report

Support for the *Learn-for-Life* Initiative in Varanasi, India

Narrative Report

General Information - Summary

Learn for Life has made significant changes to operations in 2017. This process has been significantly influenced by foreign donations and support over the years. Some of these developments have been intentional results of the project activities (e.g. improved quality of schooling, increased number of pupils, etc.), others have been spin-off results (e.g. the creation of the park that ultimately led to the introduction of pre-school education, the rooftop gardening program, music and dance therapy) and others yet again were not original goals of the project, but were only made possible by the advances made (such as the development of technical and vocational training projects and preparation for income generation for graduated pupils, family, and community members). Additionally, the administration of Learn for Life as an institution is now much more solidly established, more focussed, more results (not input) oriented and more professional.

Learn for Life now has three main areas of operation:

1. Pre-schooling for children aged 4-6 years old
2. Primary schooling for children aged 6-15 years old.
3. Technical skills training for youths and young adults.

The following number of beneficiaries has been reached in 2017:

	Number of beneficiaries
Children in pre-school	36
Children in primary school	99
Children with post-primary support	31
Youths in vocational training	51
• <i>Stitching</i>	10
• <i>Bakery and Restaurant Training</i>	15
• <i>Computer</i>	26
Adults supported	8
• <i>Stitching</i>	8
Total number of beneficiaries reached	225



1. Regarding the Primary School Program:

Number of Pupils

The number of kids enrolled in the school has increased slightly since last year. There are now almost 140 students in the preschool and primary programs, which is pushing the limit in terms of space, resources, and number of teachers. Expanding further would likely jeopardize the quality of schooling that can be provided and the amount of help that can be offered to students and families. There are no plans to increase these numbers in the near future.

Services Offered

The services offered have not changed in 2017 despite the growing number of students and the rising costs. Students do not pay anything to come to the school. All textbooks, school supplies, and uniforms are provided at no cost. Learn for Life also give shoes, socks, and winter clothing to the students every year and other items (backpacks, water bottles, hygiene items) on a need-to basis. Every school day two healthy meals are provided, where portions are not limited (taking into consideration that some students don't have enough to eat at home).

Learn for Life collaborates with Swami Varishtananda at the Ramakrishna Mission to provide free healthcare for all of students.

Schooling Infrastructure

The rooftop garden is now fully operational. Collaboration with a local business - Garden on Concrete - turned the rooftop into a thriving plantation of flowers, vines, herbs, and vegetables. This includes a monkey-safe composting area in the park. The gardeners come on a daily basis to care for and water the plants with the help of the students, often doing longer workshops with older students on sustainability, composting, wastewater collection, and rainwater harvesting. The children have been a part of this process from the start, and subsequently take pride in the plants that they are growing (and harvesting to be cooked for schools meals)

An interactive SmartBoard was purchased and is being used for film screenings and discussions with some of the older students, songs, handwriting practice, educational movies, and research, skyping with an English class in Italy to practice conversational English and learn about a different culture. A new software for the SmartBoard (EnglishHelperReadToMe), which functions as an interactive textbook and screenreader is being introduced to supplement the English curriculum. Teaching staff is being trained in how to use this tool in the classroom.

The remaining infrastructure of Lean for Life continues to be well maintained and cared for. Additionally in 2017, Learn for Life purchased new tables and a cupboard, installed solar panels in the kindergarten area, the classrooms have been freshly painted, the walls were treated to prevent termite infestation, new fans and coolers were added to rooms that needed them, etc.



Teachers and Volunteers

Because the number of students has been increasing in the past years, two additional full-time teachers were contracted in 2017 (current total number of teachers: 10). Teacher rotation with other schools continues, where some teachers decide to leave because they don't agree with the participatory schooling methods of Learn for Life or the strict policy against beating the children, a common practice in most Indian schools. In general, however, this means that the core staff that has been built up is made up of a wonderful group of open-minded and enthusiastic educators who are always up to the challenge of questioning traditions and old ways. Learn for Life tries to encourage strong bonding among staff and offers benefits and support (including funding of their own professional development and further education) to act as deterrents from leaving.

The increasing number of volunteers that visits Learn for Life is now assessed by project management. An American volunteer, Zach, an experienced preschool teacher with a background in child development and drama therapy, helps to coordinate shorter-term volunteers and visitors and improved the English curriculum. He started as a volunteer in late 2016 and since August of 2017 has obtained support to cover his living expenses. Also in 2017 a relationship with EurasiaNet and the French Civil Service was built up, which has led to two volunteers every year for 6 to 9 months to help at the school. The volunteers come from various backgrounds and bring different skills and experiences with them. In the last year, volunteers helped with English lessons, geography lessons, music therapy, art and photography workshops, and math coaching. They have also contributed to administrative and website tasks depending on their individual backgrounds. Even experienced teachers have volunteered to develop curricula and daily routines. Learn for Life management works together with volunteers and teachers to determine where support is most useful to further increase the capacities of teachers. This has proved to be very popular among the staff and effective for their development.

Teacher Training

To reduce teacher rotation and because of the schools pedagogic strategy (which is different from most Indian schools), institutionalized teacher training has become particularly important. Nicole Seregni has assumed responsibility for this with quite some success. Every Saturday afternoon teacher meetings and training sessions are conducted. On one Saturday of every month a longer training session is being done for teachers from both the BadiAsha School and the partnering Jeevan School, alternating between trainings from one school to another. This gives teachers exposure to other methods and other points of view, allowing them to compare different teaching approaches.

Manu, the practical trainer of the stitching project, has implemented teacher trainings on the creativity and art curriculum while Zach has done trainings on *Process over Product* approaches, creative projects, and lesson planning. A woman from Delhi spent a couple of months training Kindergarten teachers on a unique approach to activity planning. Minakshi, a local motivational speaker and education advocate conducted a training with all staff (teachers, bakers, cleaners, kitchen staff, everyone working together under one roof) on the goals and philosophy of Learn for Life and how they can work together to achieve those goals.



Additionally, Nicole leads teachers in English practice and women's empowerment group (basically all of current teaching staff is female) every morning before classes. This has increased the teachers' didactic and pedagogic skills and sensitized them for the very difficult target group that Learn for Life works with. This is all in addition to everyday supervision and individual meetings with the teachers as needed.

Curriculum

In general, the school followed the NCERT English medium curriculum. This is where most of the textbooks come from. The school also draws from a number of different philosophies and pedagogies about how children learn: The Montessori method (which Nicole has some experience with and Kati of Jeevan School knows very well), the Reggio Emilia philosophies (which Nicole and Zach both have extensive experience in), Krishnamurti's teaching philosophy (which Nicole has studied), and Waldorf/Steiner methodology (which has been introduced by a number of volunteers).

Teachers are encouraged to supplement the curriculum with creative activities and interactive lessons with a focus on speaking and listening in addition to reading and writing. A lot of training seeks to move away from textbook and rote learning oriented lesson planning. Learn for Life encourages activities to supplement learning, which may be unorthodox in India, such as drama activities, hands on games and activities, educational movies, discussions, and working in projects (like making documentaries and interviewing community members) to address concepts from a variety of different angles to be more inclusive of children with different learning styles.

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular classes in the afternoons include: music classes (three times a week with local musicians and traditional gharana, classical Indian singing), yoga (once a week), dance classes (once a week), creative stitching and embroidery classes (every day, led by tailors from vocational training), permanent opportunities to utilize the growing children's library, as well as utilizing the supervised free play environment in the park to play with various indoor and outdoor toys and games. At the end of every school year a trip to the waterpark is the first experience with swimming for most students.

Non-academic, yet important life-skills training (e.g. yoga, meditation, emotional health and managing anger and depression, gender equality, and women's health) are integrated into the daily class schedule whenever viable.

The involvement of parents is sought throughout the year to provide feedback on their children's learning and to introduce soft-skill training topics (e.g. the value of education, the harm of corporal punishment, hygiene, etc.). Parent meetings are now done every three months, at time with the support of outside experts.

Creativity and the Arts

BadiAsha School puts a strong focus on creativity and the arts, which is why every Saturday is dedicated to creative projects and non-traditional academic activities. On these days, each class takes on a full day creative project ranging from arts and crafts activities, baking workshops where the students work with the bakers from vocational



training to make things to share with the other students at lunch (cookies, cake, pizza, donuts), screening and discussing films that deal with social issues in India, dancing classes, outdoor sports and games, longer gardening workshops, working with clay and other explorations of materials. In addition, 2017 marked the first annual creativity week to start the school year. This is a good opportunity to get to know new students in a less formal academic setting.

The art and music therapy program overseen by Nicole is still going strong. 2017 saw purchases of more guitars, a Casio keyboard, tablas, djembes, and art supplies. The program includes therapeutic and social/emotional oriented group activities and private sessions for students with developmental, emotional, or behavioural issues. Currently, it is being assessed how to incorporate aspects of this into everyday classes.

Academic Performance

Learn for Life does not pressure its children to achieve good marks in a competitive way, but instead concentrates on a more holistic and self-motivated approach to schooling. However, because Varanasi and India as a whole are very grades focused, one cannot forgo grades entirely. This approach has worked well so far; despite not emphasizing grades or testing, so far not a single student has failed to get into a secondary school program after finishing class 5; in general their performance is above average in the schools they enter. This year, a 2016 graduate from BadiAsha won the Student of the Year Award from his current school.

What Happens to Alumni

In general, youths are often pushed to leave school early to start work and supplement the family income. Learn for Life would like to avoid this as much as possible by providing vocational training on the one hand (see below), but also by supporting former pupils in furthering their academic education in private schools. While the overall quality of secondary schools is not particularly impressive, Learn for Life has found Hindi and English medium school options for both boys and girls that are adequate, but the management continues to assess other schools to ensure not only a continuation of schooling, but of quality schooling.

Last year, 7 out of 11 graduating students passed the entrance examination to a prestigious English medium school in the area. All graduating students passed the Hindi medium school entrance exams. Especially given the background that the kids come from (many of them are the first in their families to receive any schooling at all), this is considered very impressive. Once children qualify for schools that charge a school fee, Learn for Life works together with the parents to make sure that children will not be barred from this unique opportunity because of a lack of funds. Currently, 31 alumni receive support with full or partial secondary school tuition fee coverage, offering free coaching for them as well. This number is increasing yearly.

2. Regarding the Pre-school Program:

Number of children



The number of children in BadiAsha School's early education program has not grown significantly since 2016. At 36 students, the limit in terms of space and resources has been reached. There are currently no plans to expand the number of children admitted, but rather to seek to maintain as high a quality of schooling as possible for this number.

Curriculum development

There is very little precedent for pre-schooling in Varanasi, as most pre-school programs are either academically focused preparatory programs for primary school, where kids are taught to sit still, work, and behave with the threat of punishment looming over them or "play-group" style nurseries with very limited supervision or planning. The few real pre-school programs in Varanasi are for profit programs for families that can afford them, not for children coming from dire backgrounds.

This year, a more play based curriculum has been implemented in pre-school classrooms, dedicating a large portion of each day to child initiated investigations and activities. Teachers act as facilitators to the growth and learning process by observing and asking open ended questions, helping the children to make their own discoveries rather than directing their play. Pre-schooling does not rely on textbooks. Rather, teaching happens through songs, games, reading out loud, hands-on activities, and exploration of different toys and materials according to a variety of Western and Indian pedagogies. While some of the daily activities are teacher-led group activities, participation is not mandatory in anything. Most activities are either small group oriented or child initiated. Gross motor and fine motor choices are both available each day as well as access to art materials, dramatic play, books, and construction toys. The teachers facilitate this and observe the children, taking inspiration from the children's own interests for further activities.

3. Vocational training

The vocational training program, which started in 2016, has grown substantially in 2017. The main components of this program are the bakery and kitchen program, the stitching program, computer classes, and basic math, English, and business training. The main of the program is to give young people from the community skills, which will help them to support themselves in the future.

Bakery and Kitchen Training

The basis for the idea of training in bakery is that Learn for Life is closely linked to the Brown Bread Bakery. Initially mothers of children from BadhiAsha School were employed as secondary employment in the bakery, but only for the production of staple foods such as cereals, which they can then sell through the bakery to earn an income for their children. Eight mothers were able to make a living this way. Financing for vocational training in bakery was not secured until early 2017. The aim was to offer training that is on the one hand very practice-oriented (which is possible through the cooperation with Brown Bread Bakery) and whose standards are comparable to those of a Central European apprenticeship.

From mid-2017, the first steps in training of bakery apprentices could be taken and an apprenticeship could be started. Most of vocational training is of a practical nature. The



head baker trains the bakers and the chefs train the cooks in the branches in Varanasi and Delhi. In the first year they were taught the basics of cooking and baking. The apprentices learn health and safety protocols, the ingredients and their characteristics are explained to them, the effective use and maintenance of the equipment is shown and it is illustrated how effective cooperation helps to implement the tasks quickly, cleanly and safely.

In addition, they learn basic economic and mathematical skills, such as how many ingredients are needed to produce different amounts of the product, and calculate the cost of the combined ingredients. They will also learn how to interact directly with customers, both in service side of the job (in the restaurant and guesthouse) and in sales (at the bakeries).

So far, it seems that even being involved in training has helped the apprentices to fundamentally improve their attitudes to life. 6 youths started in the bakery project in 2017.

Stitching Project

After establishing the tailoring program in 2016, the program was further expanded and professionalized in 2017. Another three sewing machines were purchased. A curriculum was developed and is continuously evaluated and improved. The final curriculum is expected to be completed in 2018.

The 2-year training course has been extended. In 2016, a total of eight people who have not attended school started the training course. The course includes an introduction (embroidery, tailoring and tapestry) followed by the main program (sewing and pattern design). The aim is to train students in textile and fashion design. It should be noted that it has turned out that the duration of the course has to be increased. This is primarily because the students already have to work and earn money to maintain their families. 1-year courses would be too dense if they were to be given these freedoms as well as high-quality training. Therefore, the course has been extended to two years. Two more students picked up the course in 2017.

Training includes working together on projects to promote teamwork and mutual learning. Besides already established techniques, they learn to let their creativity run free and to make new designs. So far they have been able to improve the quality of their sewing and finishing techniques as well as some troubleshooting techniques.

Another important part of training is the transfer of basic economic and mathematical knowledge. This includes learning how to measure and calculate the amount of fabric required per garment, the cost of materials and the price of the work.

The children's stitching class is going well also. They are working with four of class 3 to 5 students and six girls from outside. All of the children are between 10 and 15 years old. They did a long-term process oriented group embroidery project to focus on collaboration skills. Since then, they have started changing to a more individualized approach towards learning. Each child picks their own projects to work on under the guidance and mentoring of the teachers. They have been working a lot with wool threads, and their skills are improving.



Computer training

Another 6 computers have been purchased for computer training, which is offered to school children in the morning and for young people from the region in the afternoon. Since 2016, two classes of 15 children each have been taught every two days after lunch.

In addition, every afternoon another 26 people from the community, mainly women, came for computer training. One can attend semi-annual courses, which are also certified upon successful completion - a type of computer driving licence. Courses include Desktop Setup, Paint, Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Internet use.

In addition, a basic course in computer use is also offered for all participants in vocational training programs, tailoring and bakery.

It has been found that the level of basic English varies greatly from one student to another. Subsequently, English lessons are now being offered to the students. To help to streamline training, the sessions are provided for different groups: 1. bakers and women who help in the bakery and grain room, 2. cooks and waiters from the guesthouse and the women who help to run the Learn for Life shop, 3. cooks and waiters from Vegan and Raw, 4. tailors and women in the stitching program, and 5. staff from the bakery in Delhi.

Shops

One of the biggest difficulties for small businesses in Varanasi is to find access to a market. To help graduates get to the market and to give them experience in small business and retail, Learn for Life has opened two shops in Varanasi that support both the Women's Empowerment and vocational training programs. The Learn for Life Shops (one on Bangali Tola beside the guesthouse and one by Vegan and Raw at Tulsi Ghat) sell products made and processed in the bakery such as mueslis, cookies, jams, nut butters, and organic grains as well as clothing made by Learn for Life tailors and women involved in the stitching project. The profits from the shops help to cover operating costs for the training programs and other endeavours of Learn for Life.

4. Future Outlook

In 2018, the English, computer, and economic skills training components of the vocational training programs will be strengthened and expanded. A full time teacher ought to be contracted who can dedicate his energy exclusively to this project. The music and art therapy program will also be expanded. Further partnerships with other community organizations, schools, and businesses will be pursued to make the educative approach as holistic as possible.