

Meeting minutes: 17th teleconference on self-sustenance: Asha-Shikshamitra initiative: Sunday, Feb 13th at 10 am EST

Attendees: Rajeev (MIT/Boston), Padmanava (Atlanta), Ajoy (UFlorida), Swati (Shikshamitra) and Sudeshna (Shikshamitra)

Background of Shikshamitra:

Shikshamitra (Friends of learning) is an experimental school and resource center in Kolkata mainly for secondary education. It is different from a typical school because its objective is to educate students by giving them a more holistic education to get on with their life compared to that provided in mainstream schools. It was set up in Jan 2005 and educates children in the age group 9-15 years. Swanirvar project in West Bengal is Shikshamitra's parent organization. Most of its students belong to the slums in Kolkata.

Shikshamitra aims to improve the quality of education in other NGO and Government run schools by training teachers and by providing good quality education materials. During the last five years it had developed techniques that can help educational projects all over India. Shikshamitra is based in Kolkata, West Bengal and it is trying to reach out to India wide Asha projects.

Please update us with the recent developments in your school.

In the previous conference call we told you about our decision to close the school. We had around 30 students in our school which has dropped recently for various reasons. It is not feasible for us to run this school with students less than 30. In this scenario we have decided to stop the school and focus more on teacher training. Shikshamitra's teacher training initiative has been going on for a long time. We are better equipped to do these trainings and would like to continue training teachers in the future.

The school is struggling with student drop outs. One of the reason for student drop out being the inability of the school to provide certificates (This school does not follow Govt. curriculum). Students seek certificates for their education. However to give certificates Shikshamitra will need to be registered with the Government. For registration we will need to have an elected body to run the school. That essentially means that we will lose all control over how the school is run, what is taught & how it is taught. This will prevent us from experimenting with education which is the sole reason why the school exists in the first place. We help students that need certificates take the standard board exams through open schools. The second reason for student dropout is the migration of families from the locality

to other places due to security issues. Slums are not safe places for families. Hence we have decided to stop the school and instead concentrate on training teachers.

During mid Jan, 2011 Shikshamitra students started transferring to other schools. We are still in touch with a lot of our students. We help them out with their educational efforts and future plans. Senior most students are taking admission in Rabindra Mukta Vidyalaya (RMV). West Bengal Council of Rabindra Open Schooling aims to impart non-formal education to groups such as children of school-going age, persons who have dropped out of schools and those who cannot be reached by the formal school education system (From website). RMV is considered Madhyamik (10 std.) level education. Any children above 14 years can enroll in RMV. You don't have to take all the subjects, exams are administered twice a year, June and December. A student gets a maximum time limit of 5 years to pass the exam. 8 different subjects are tested in the RMV examination. No age limits for taking this exam. Students younger than 14 years can't appear. Admission fees are exempted for disabled students.

Please tell us about your future plans.

We would like to develop Shikshamitra as a creativity center, not only for kids but also for parents who are from the lower economic strata. There are people who are interested in setting up Shikshamitra type of schools. We will offer technical help for such endeavors.

What are your plans for training teachers from other states?

In the previous conference calls we have discussed that initially training will start with projects that use Bengali, English and Hindi as the language of instruction. In the second phase the training will be extended to projects using Oriya and Assamese languages. Two important areas of training are accelerated reading and creative writing. We will need some time to develop the training materials for accelerated reading. It will not take much time to develop materials for creative writing.

You have asked for some extra funding for the school space from Asha? Can you please comment on that?

The 2,100 sq. ft. space (6-7 rooms) in an apartment complex that we are using currently for the school is also used as the office space for teacher training activities. The current rent for this space is Rs. 20K per month. At present the rent for the school space is sponsored by an NGO from Japan. However, their funding will stop in March, 2011 with the closure of the school since the Japanese NGO was primarily interested in the school and would not support us for teacher training activities. In this scenario we are asking for Asha's support with 50% of the rent and we can take care of the remaining amount.

How much time everyday do you spend in this space? Why do you want to keep this place for training activities?

We use this space from 8:45 am to 6-7 pm every day. The rent for this space at Rs. 20,000 per month is quite cheap compared to current market price. We may not get such a good deal if we leave this space. If we stay in this place we can work with the community as we are familiar with the locality. This place being in the center of the city is lot more commutable and accessible to visitors. We have talked to our other funder, Wipro. They have advised us to keep this space. We have asked for some financial help from Wipro but they have not got back to us yet. At present we are not sure how much of this space will be utilized for training activities. However, we can give you a better estimate after we finish 1 year of training activities with schools. We are also open to other options. It will be great if someone can donate 1,500 square feet of space for our training activities. Please let us know if you can find someone who will be interested in donating space. In that case we will leave the current premises. We will wait for Asha's decision on the extra rent amount. In the mean time we will look extensively for a smaller space of around 1,500 sq. ft. in area.

You work with slum children. Do the children stay inside the school premises?

No, the school premises were never used by the students for living purposes.

You use plastic squares, circles, rectangles etc. to teach algebra to students. This seems like a novel way to teach algebra. Can you please tell us more on the usefulness of such an approach?

Students have difficulty in understanding the difference between $2x$ and x^2 in algebra. We use this method to help students visualize maths. This helps in their conceptual understanding of the subject. You can use this method to do integer subtractions and multiplications, polynomials, quadratic equation etc.

How is the creative writing course helpful to students?

In this course students are encouraged to be creative and write on their own. We used to go and teach creative writing to some students in a coaching centers run by an NGO called Nivedita every Friday for 4 weeks. After the training students told the teachers that they can write on their own and showed more confidence with their writing skills.