

Below are our chapter's questions from the 6 March 2005 projects meeting and Dr. Balu's email responses.

****Additional comments/information from teleconference on 9 April 2005 (Attendees: Melli, Amy, Parthiv, Dr. Balasubramaniam) are in red italics.***

Dear Parthiv/Amy,

This is regarding some of the questions that you had. I have tried to provide as much clarifications as possible. do mail me if you need any further information. The head of our Inst. based education programs is currently on Sabbatical and will be back on the 1st of May 05. She is Malathi and can be reached at hdm_mysore@yahoo.com after this date. She will be the nodal person for the tribal school from then onwards.

(1) We noticed that in the past year girls' enrollment has dropped by about 10%. Is there a specific reason that girls' enrollment is dropping? We are also concerned about this. We are yet to identify the exact reason for the same and this is not a trend seen over the years. Over the years, admission to girl children was steadily increasing. This aberration is a matter of concern for us too. We are planning a strategy session in the month of may to address this issue and plan on different approaches to address the same.

Around the onset of menarche (13-14 years or grades 7-10), some girls who return home for their school holidays often partner with another boy (usually older than them) and begin to live together and don't return to school. This is often culturally accepted by the tribal community, i.e., parents don't necessarily discourage this. So the enrollment numbers in the past and now may reflect increases in girls' enrollment due to signing up of new students in the early grades, but loss of students in the older grades due to the above situation. The school does have a trained health worker come to teach sex education. In addition all teachers undergo a "life skills training" intended to address such matters. There are also two counselors in residence (1 in boys' hostel, 1 in girls' hostel), who may have had some success in helping to reduce dropout rates. But this is an ongoing concern.

- (2) It appears that in your last batch of class X students, girls' pass rates were lower than boys'. Do you believe there is any specific reason for this?

This has been the case over the last few years. All thru, the girls have not been performing as well as the boys. We feel not having lady teachers at the high school level could be a contributing cause. We are now trying our best to recruit adequate lady teachers as and when vacancies arise.

Girls seem to have satisfactory performance in the elementary grades, but begin to have problems in the middle school and high school grades. The elementary grades don't participate in formal examinations in the way upper grades do. The absence of lady teachers at the high school level is one hypothesis that came out of interactions between girl students and a counselor, but this is an ongoing question that may require further discussion with the teachers. In May there will be a large meeting (when the new school director, Ms. Malathi returns from her advanced training sabbatical) of school staff and some outside professors (?) and this issue will be discussed further.

- (3) From the VCTL goal statement we know that you care deeply about the value of girls' education. Can our chapter do anything to support girls' education directly vis-à-vis questions (1) and (2)?

One area of support could be to start awareness generation activities amongst parents and the general community about the need for girl's education. Other areas of support could be to provide some non-cash incentives to girl children performing well. (we need to brainstorm on this and get back to you)

One idea that is being looked into is to have one or two tribal graduates of the school do some community outreach to further establish links between the school and community and to raise awareness about the importance of remaining in school through class X and not becoming involved in male/female partnerships at such an early age. Dr. Balu will send us the anticipated costs associated with this pilot program, and our chapter can discuss it.

- (4) What is next step for kids after passing? Do they want to leave their area? Can they be entrepreneurs locally? Does the community have its own ideas about what students can do after they have graduated? As we are new project stewards, perhaps you could also describe the local economy to us.

This is a question that we are constantly asking and trying to address. WE do have strong linkages with children who have graduated from the school. We encourage them to pursue the further education in H D Kote town, Mysore and some have even been sent to Bangalore. Those not pursuing mainstream education have been trained in a few para-medical vocations and employed in the health projects of SVYM. This year are starting a Career Guidance and Counselling center to help and address this issue both amongst the tribal and other non-tribal students in the area. Regarding the present situation, i shall add a note.

(5) Melli mentioned to us that some students have had a challenging time upon finishing their studies and leaving their homes to enter college. Can you provide us a description of the experience of those students who have gone on college? Where did they go and what was it like for some of them?

Students were admitted to Mysore. They could not integrate with the lifestyle demands of mysore city and had to come back. Now we are not encouraging them to go to colleges in mysore. We are promoting colleges in rural/semi-urban environments for them. (eg: Saragur and H D Kote). Only a few students are currently studying in mysore and in bangalore for courses not normally avbl in rural colleges.

(6) What type of vocational training do the students receive? What has happened as a result of any vocational training? Have any students gotten jobs from this, and are they able to transition into life after school?

Vocational training is in subjects like horticulture, drawing and painting, computer and office automation, tailoring, pottery and sculpture, dress designing, carpentry etc. they are all being presently trained in specialised instns and are yet to graduate to the extent of finding jobs. Only one student with training in painting is now self employed and earning a decent livelihood.

(7) We understand you have a very nice library at VCTL. One Asha volunteer mentioned that the Tulika group, www.tulikabooks.com, (publishers whose books have been used in other Asha projects) has Kannada/English children's books. Are you familiar with Tulika, and could VCTL benefit from these types of children's books? If you know of them, what do you think about their books in terms of content and pricing? We can bring it up as a discussion item at one of our meetings if you feel these types of books may benefit VCTL.

WE do have a good library facility. We need more info regarding the tulika books. I shall get more info about this, talk to our VTCL team and revert back to you in mid-may after our strategy meet.

Dr. Balu has requested information on learning standards for each grade in the US, with the intention of developing locally, contextually-relevant standards to the VCTL school. He is also interested in evaluation of teachers in the US. Amy will continue to be in correspondence with Dr. Balu in regard to these topics.

As English is taught in the schools, Dr. Balu mentioned that volunteers interested in teaching English during a 8-12-week stay would be welcomed. Past foreign visitors could be contacted to learn more about their experiences there.

In the past, SVYM had a sister school in the UK. This fell through after that teacher left the British school. Dr. Balu expressed an interest in starting such a program again in the future.