

Virtual visit via skype, by Melli Annamalai, project steward, Asha-Boston/MIT

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We are in regular touch with the project over the phone and email. We attempted the skype video interaction to have more interactions with the entire team. It was successful and gave me a sense of a “virtual visit.”

March is exam month, so many students, particularly students from class X and XII (board exam students) were very busy. Still the students in class IX and class X took the time to participate in the skype video call.

I interacted with about 6 girls and 8 boys from classes IX and X, and about 10 volunteers (college students who teach the school students).

Students: It was a Sunday, so I asked the students what they typically did on a Sunday. Everybody comes to the centers on Sundays also. Class IX has a library hour (they have 3000 books in the library, however they are all story books, they don't seem to have reference books, books on History, Science, etc, I will look into this on my next physical visit.) Then they play games (carrom, chess, I told them about our chapter's carrom competition) and then watch a movie.

The last movie they had watched was 'English Vinglish'. This was very interesting to me, as I really like that movie and the way it makes a statement about women empowering themselves. We discussed that movie for a short while. The main thing the children had taken away from the movie was that one can learn English if one wanted to, if one put their mind to it, and if one worked hard. To me the movie was about women's empowerment, and learning English was an example used in the movie. But the students had taken away learning English as the key thing from the movie. I brought up the women empowerment issue again and again, but they went back to talking about learning English. It had been inspiring to them that people can English if they work hard. To me this illustrates the deep desire to learn English. This is such an important issue for them, and they see it something essential but very hard to do. Compared to everything else in the movie, this was what they took away.

We took some time to discuss their English learning classes. They use Oxford University material (OUP material known to have good English teaching material), Tulika books, and Chipper sage CDs. They also have pronunciation focused classes.

For English, Tamil and Maths they have two streams of classes – “School” classes and regular classes. For example, “School Maths” and regular Maths (mental calculations, fun math problems, problems from the Young World section of The Hindu), “School English” and regular English. “School” class means they are focused on the syllabus, and the regular classes are aimed at learning the basics, ensuring that there are no gaps, etc. I think this is a great idea, to have two types of classes. Exams demand thorough knowledge of a specific syllabus, while not being that conducive for learning concepts. Exams are important, but one has to learn concepts too. So having both ensures that one is

not sacrificed for the other. We went over the detailed timetable they follow each week for these classes.

At a recent Science discussion event on the occasion of C.V. Raman's birthday Elavarasi (Karthi's wife, a volunteer) talked about why the sky is blue. Since I had forgotten my high school lesson on this I asked them to explain it to me, which they did enthusiastically. I asked why from among the VIBGYOR colors it was the blue which was dispersed over all other colors and they explained that it was because of the VIB position in the VIBGYOR spectrum (blue is scattered more because it was shorter wavelength).

Volunteers: Undergraduate students teach middle school students (class V – VII) post-graduate students teach high school and higher secondary school students. Volunteers were studying BA Tamil, MCom, BCA, MBA, BA Maths, BE Civil engineering, etc. (I did not recognize the name of many of the colleges they were studying in, this might mean they are newer colleges.)

Mr. Murugesh and Viji have been volunteering for the last several months and they have been a big help to the project. They stumbled on to the project when they found the website, and they have brought expertise (Viji has a masters in child care and education) and structure to the teaching activities.

Building: Karthi has temporarily donated his home for use by Seed Narpanigal. It has been painted, renovated a bit, and AV equipment (donated by the Swiss group) installed. They took the camera they were using for Skype around the room to show me. It is a 20x20 room. They raised funds for this from the community and contributed labor for the building and painting.

We had funded a temporary roof on a terrace for two classes. It has been used by younger classes, but they have been moved to an inside room and older children use the terrace space, as that worked better for the younger children.