

Conference call with Jeevan Gnanodaya (JG)

May 27, 2010 | 9:00PM central time

Attendees:

Senthil (Se) (Atlanta),
Charanya (C) (Austin),
Aravind (A), Ankur, Shankar (S) (UIUC), and,
Devarajan (D) from JG.

Minutes (by A, S):

All: Introductions.

S: Could you give us a general update to get the call started?

D: 9 kids (3 girls, 6 boys) wrote 10th standard exam. We had a 100% pass rate, and in fact all scored over 80% in all 5 subjects - Tamil 1&2, Science, Social studies and Math. Like seen in many other schools, here also girls have done better than the boys. In fact, they have 3 highest totals from the school. One girl got 86% in math, the highest this year.

We're very happy with the results. This is the best results we have so far. In fact, we were a little afraid because we felt that this batch may not be "up to the mark" but the results surpassed our expectations. The ITI final exams are coming up soon, and we need to prepare them for that. Due to peak summer, the ITI students have also gone on a ten day break for now. They should be back next week.

S: What do these 9 children plan to do?

D: The boys will join ITI. Not sure about girls' plans, need to wait and see. There are some requests to install a +2 program, but we can't do that. There are a lot of requirements, and we can't manage that. We tried this earlier and failed.

S: Have you met the students who passed?

D: No, school will open in a few days; they are on vacation. ITI students will be back by 31st. Others start coming in after June 2. By Jun 10 or 13th they will all be back.

S: How were the results for the lower grades?

D: This year the grades that we give are ratified by the govt. i.e. they will oversee the exam procedure. DEO will evaluate results, may recommend a few students for re-evaluation or re-taking exams. This is a new trend this year.

S: Can you send us an annual report type document for the previous year?

D: We are trying to prepare an annual report. We haven't done it for the past 5 years.

S: Won't the trust expect an annual progress report?

D: During the annual day, we showcase all the results to all who attend. Most donors attend the program. We read out results and other achievements during this program.

S: Anyway, can you send us something by July?

D: Sure.

C: Will you also prepare an audit report for your finances?

D: Yes the auditing will be finished in July. We will send a copy to income tax dept and one to all of you. Right now we have only an unaudited report. We will send you the audited report along with the annual report in July.

C: How many new students will join this year?

D: We selected 7 new kids at kindergarten level. The situation in other classes will be known only in June.

C: Including 7, how many kids are there?

D: 130-137. We need to maintain this number to ensure proper ratios.

C: After school reopens can you send a list of how many kids in each class?

D: Yes definitely. However, there are some cases where admissions occur during the year; this depends on individual students.

C: We also sent some questions on numbers via email. Could you reply to those when you find the time?

D: Sure.

S: Vicki and Barry visited us last week. We had a meeting for about 2 hours and then had dinner. We talked to V&B about their experiences there, and specifically about signing. They mentioned that only one teacher was signing. Sarika also said something similar.

However, we were under the impression that some minimal sign language is being taught to kids in higher grades. Could you explain?

D: Most so-called trained teachers in TN only have training in oral teaching, i.e., not in sign language. Some are taught sign language, but their knowledge is minimal. There is only one school that trains kids in sign language. The ITI is completely taught in sign language. Ganesh there teaches with signs.

S: Yes we know about Ganesh at the ITI. However, you said that you were teaching English through sign language?

D: The ITI is completely in english. No Tamil words there. When teaching subjects like science and theoretical subjects, they use Tamil as a medium of communication. So that is through oral means.

S: I remember that the ITI exam papers are in English. But when I visited, the teacher was teaching something in Tamil. What about 1-10 grades? Weren't you supposed to have started English there with signs?

D: Yes but we can't do signs the whole day. There is only one period.

S: Yes we understand that there is only one period and that you need to do other stuff. However, V&B never saw signs being used? Though both V&B use American Sign Language, they could have observed a class where sign language is taught and then given suggestions. So we were wondering why they were not shown these signing classes.

D: They used to spend 2-3 hours each day. Each day they would spend time with a different class. They did not sit in on ongoing classes. So they probably did not have a chance to observe.

Also, it is hard to introduce to sign language all of a sudden and completely

transition to it as we need to conduct other classes too, and with exams in mind, there are so many things to manage.

S: All fine, but we were hoping that V&B, and Sarika, who know sign language, could give some feedback on sign language instruction. So if you had shown it to them, it would have been nice.

D: Teachers have only basic knowledge of ISL. They are not great experts. We will slowly start focusing on sign language. We have started teaching 6-9th standard kids, English words through sign language, but that's only one period a day. Now we can start teaching younger kids too. The marriage hall is a big time commitment and takes a lot of my time. Hence I can't focus so much on teaching right now. I don't have time to devote to each class to make sure things are going well.

S: One very important clarification begs to be offered - we are not trying to force sign language on you. As you know, we began this whole thing as a dialog, and at some point both of us felt (or so we thought) that introducing signs would be helpful. We have been talking about this for 2 years. Since we have started it, we are just asking about follow-ups. That's all.

D: But kids are finding it hard to get sign language.

S: A asks if you use sign language for communication between students and between teacher-kids.

D: No, only general signs (gestures); not the standardized sign language. General signs are those that are informally developed by students and the school folks.

A: Sign language is needed for effective 2 way communication, no?

D: Yeah. I agree. I just get distracted by exam pressure etc. and hence haven't been able to do complete justice on this front. I sometimes feel that it won't be useful in outside world. So we have not concentrated on it because need to first cater to basic requirements - passing exams, etc. Also, teachers are not used to using signs. No deaf school in TN uses sign language. We can't compel them to use signs.

S: Let's go back a few steps here. Do YOU think sign language is essential? This is very important. So please tell us if YOU think it is a good idea.

D: I completely agree that sign language is useful. Sign language is useful for communicating in English. It is useful to teach English. It is useful for higher studies, as many deaf higher education places seem to use sign language.

S: OK, I think there is a big communication gap here. There are NOT the reasons why (at least to my understanding) why we ran this idea by you. The real reason, again as I understand it, is something along these lines:

The mainstream people who can hear well have a first language, which we call our mother tongue in most cases. It is this language which serves as a foundation for development of any ideas thereafter - be it learning a new subject, or language, or even the very basis of thinking. And all our mother tongues being a "proper" language (like Tamil, Hindi, etc.), they have a grammar, structure, context, what not. It is a full-fledged language, and very expressive in potential.

However, deaf kids don't have a natural first language. So they use sign language which functions as a natural sign language. Gestures are good, but they have limits. They are not a fully fledged language, and hence cannot form the basis for all types of learning. Hence the need for a "real language" that is suitable for the deaf - this is the role that sign language plays.

Again, we are not saying that you have to radically change the whole teaching method there. We are not even asking you to do something you won't believe in yourself! Once you think it is a good idea, all we're saying is let's begin by taking some baby steps.

D: Well, now I understand. We never had such an elaborate discussion before. But here everyone uses only speech. It is quite a revolutionary idea to introduce signs from a young age. So it needs a lot of effort to introduce it at that level itself.

S: Yes, we know you are using general signs. But their scope can be limited. We are just trying to formalize things with signs. We do not want to detract from your goals of improving academic results, etc. Anyway, I think it's time to draw a line on this discussion and move on to other questions.

Se: Perhaps we should identify some mutually agreed upon milestones for this sign language project.

S: Yes, we do want to do that, and in general identify metrics to track the progress in general. In fact, there is a question regarding this later on this call.

S: Moving on to your budget, last time you asked for 6 teachers. This time 3 of them are different from last year's list. Could you explain?

D: Sudhakar, Anitha, Krishnaveni have left from last year. Ramajayam, Rajeshwari, Sasikala are continuing. Jenith, Vijila, Shanti are new in this year's list. The new teachers with special training are adept in teaching deaf kids, but don't have much general knowledge to teach, i.e., they haven't taken higher degree courses like BSc or any kind of specialization.

Reasons for leaving: Anita started a school of her own in Ooty. Teachers leave because they get higher salaries (even an extra 500 rupees matter). Mr. Sudhakar and Ms. Krishnaveni got jobs in govt. schools.

Shanthi - though in new list will be relieved soon due to some teaching proficiency issues.

S: What is JD TD, etc?

D: SD TD = senior diploma teaching deaf, JD TD = junior diploma teaching deaf

S: Which classes to these people teach?

D: 1-5. Of these teachers, only Vijila can handle all classes. And only Rajeshwari knows a little about ISL. Everyone else is only trained in speech.

S: Who is Ms. Sasikala? I remember seeing someone with 20 years of experience?

D: There are two of them with same name. One of them is an experienced teacher (22 years). She's not doing too well these days (old age), so are trying to relieve her from teaching and getting her to do management tasks mostly.

S: What's her salary?

D: 6.5K - this is a bit weird as she is one of our best teachers, and the one with most experience. And yet, some of the new "trained" teachers get more pay. We can't help it though. I just make it up by helping our experienced teachers better during times of their personal crisis, etc. Also, she will be given something like a retirement package.

Se: You have sent us a proposal for about 7 lakhs. Are you asking for about 50% of that?

D: Yes. We haven't gotten any local donations since Jan. We think it is because of starting the marriage hall. Many donors now think we are now well settled.

Se: How will you manage the remaining 40-50% of the funds?

D: We will try to get (local) donations. We hope that our 20-year relationship won't come to an arbitrary stop just like that (because of this marriage hall). Let's see.

Se: How many students?

D: We have 90-95 in hostel and 40 day scholars.

Se: When do you expect the funds?

D: We would really like it by June end.

S, Se: We will try to speed up decision process at our chapters. We will keep you posted.

[END OF CALL]

Action items:

1. JG to send annual report and audited financial report for past year by end of July.
 2. Since the metrics were not discussed on the call, Shankar will get in touch offline to figure this out. Basically, we need to identify clear tracking points for the next one year - both specific to the sign language instruction part, and in general.
 3. Chapters to try and speed up approval for next year as the schools reopen really soon (June 2nd).
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