Shikshamitra conference call: Sunday, March 31, 2013 at 11 am EDT

Attendees: Lokendra Bengani (UFlorida), Shraddha Sundaram (UFlorida), Amey Barde (UFlorida), Ajoy K. Saha (UFlorida), Swati Sircar (Shikshamitra) and Sudeshna Sinha (Shikshamitra).

Q1. Can you please tell us about your teacher-training programs with the Asha-Yale project, Mukti?
Mukti's teacher-training happened in three phases during 2012. The final evaluation for the program is pending; it will be done in 2013. Each training phase was succeeded by a follow-up. In 2012 we made 5 visitations to Mukti.

Teachers at Mukti are taking some time to implement whatever they have learned during the training and the implementation is supposed to start in 2013. Shikshamitra will be visiting Mukti again in 2013 to figure out how the teachers are faring and to do the final evaluation.

Q2. Please briefly tell us about your experience with the Mukti teacher-training.
Our experience with Mukti teacher-training has been explained in details in the Mukti training reports, available on the Shikshamitra ashanet webpage. Some of the highlights of the training are: As for Maths, the Mukti teachers don't need any external trainer.

 Although, the teachers have the solutions to their problems, they don't tend to agree on those suggestions. They needed an authority that can identify the right answers.

Training experiences with old and young teachers were different. Relationship between younger teachers and their students was better. Younger teachers were more receptive to our suggestions than the older teachers.

As for English training, lot of unlearning the old English stuff had to be done. Many older teachers said they were reading English this way for the first time; they need to learn Shikshamitra's way of teaching English themselves, before they could use the technique in class.

We met one teacher at Mukti, Animeshbabu, who helped us in training the teachers with his English teaching skills using sound and playacting.

Q3. Please tell us about the other programs that you have carried out during 2012-2013.
This Jan Bangla program got started in 15 Govt. schools in Swanirvar's operational area. Students taking admission in class V do not have basic Bengali reading and writing skills.

Since the medium of instruction is Bengali in these schools, a lot of peer pressure from all teachers to learn Bengali existed. This helped us a lot in administering the training, as everybody was interested.

These schools usually have 1/2 teachers per school, who teaches Bengali to the students. There are some changes going on with text books, cluster level orientations taking place all over West Bengal.

We have started some community libraries last year, they are doing well. The libraries usually operate once a week, but now students want them to remain open twice a week.

Q4. Right to Education (RTE) efforts are mainly focused on infrastructure development in schools. Are they also looking into curriculum changes?
Yes, many changes in the syllabus have taken place in West Bengal. New books for grades 3, 5 and 7 have already come. In 2014 brand new text books for grades 2, 4, 6 and 8 will be introduced.

We are happy with the changes in Maths curriculum, 90% of the text contents are good. However, we felt that the content of the text books on languages are not satisfactory and needs improvement.

Q5. We know that you have been working on the story cards, to improve reading comprehension of students, and that you have also published them. Are you currently working on the development of any other teaching/learning materials?
Yes we have prepared some Maths cards, these publications are ready to be picked up. One type cards help children master multiplication tables. In particular these will help children recall (say) 6×7 without going through 6×1, 6×2, etc. Each card has a pattern on its back and that will indicate any mistake made.

In another set, called domino cards, each card has two sides – left and right – and on each side is a number or a problem (e.g. $60 - 42$), right side of the one card need to the matched with the left side of the other and thus 6 cards have to be put in a series. We have sold some of these cards. Whenever we are invited for training somewhere, we sell.

We also partnered with an organization and sold few cards through their stall in the Kolkata Book Fair.

Q6. Apart from Mukti, which other Asha-project are you working with at present?
We are working with another Asha-Yale project, Shamayita. This project has a formal school, and follows the CBSE curriculum. This is an English medium school; the students are good in English. Hence it doesn't need English intervention.

However, the Maths teachers have no experience teaching students with materials. They will need some training on teaching maths using materials. We are in the process of preparing a proposal for the same.

Q7. There are not many Asha projects that have asked for the Shikshamitra training, how would you like to modify your strategy to attract more Asha projects for the training?
We have been providing training to organizations separately, i.e. we worked exclusively with Mukti teachers and will work exclusively with Shamayita teachers and so on. Next year onwards we would like to offer training in a different mode.

There will be ONE centralized training (say English Phase 1) where teachers from several organizations can participate. Then separate follow up and again centralized Phase 2 and so on.

These will help in multiple ways – (i) instead of repeating the same training multiple times, we would provide that in one shot – so it will be less energy and time consuming and therefore less expensive, (ii) there will be some cross sharing of ideas and experiences among the participating organizations, (iii) <u>since the training timings will be announced ahead of time the concerned organization/Asha partners will be able to plan their schedule and take advantage of these trainings</u>. Note: we are thinking of 3-5 days of residential training.

Q8. Is there any issue you have faced, which is a common problem among students irrespective of the languages they follow?
One important issue that students and teachers often face at schools is that in many cases the languages taught in schools are different from what students use for communication at home.

For instance, there are several tribal groups in West Bengal (WB). They speak their own languages at home. However, in most WB schools the medium of instruction is Bengali.

When we ask the students to write the synonym of a word say "cloud", they will write the word synonymous of cloud in their own home language.

This word is different from the Bengali word which means cloud. Many teachers will mark this answer wrong, because it is not the Bengali word they are looking for.

But you can see that the student is not wrong, he just wrote whatever he has learnt at home. In such cases teachers should be lenient and not mark the answer incorrect. They need to adapt to the situation and understand the student's perspective. But we find teachers very rigid about these issues.

Q9. Did you try to find people among the teachers that you train, who in turn can carry out similar training initiatives after their own training?

It is difficult to find people who have the temperament and skills to train others. However, from time to time we do run into motivated individuals who can provide important help to teachers, even if they cannot train them directly. An example is Animeshbabu from Mukti. He can be a great help and resource person to teachers in Mukti's operational area.

Another example is Rumi Ganguly, an English teacher in a Govt. high school in North 24 Parganas. But because of her involvement in a Govt school, she is not available for training on school days; however she has agreed to help us provided it doesn't conflict with her school schedule.

Q10. Let's talk about the budget. Can you please explain the relative changes that you made to the 2013-2014 budget compared to that of 2012-2013?

The salaries of two employees have been increased by 10% compared to last year. We have also hired two new employees to work for us. Prama Bsu Roy and Aditi Mazumdar. Prama did her MA degree in education from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

Currently, she will be employed for 6 months. She is looking for scholarships to go abroad. In case she wants to continue with Shikshamitra after 6 months, we will retain her as a permanent employee.

Aditi will be the English trainer. She has an MA degree, is already experienced in teacher training. She used to work with [Vidya Bhavan](#) previously, which is an education resource center in Udaipur, Rajasthan. The salaries of these two employees have been added to this year's budget. Other than the above, our expenses remain similar to last year.

This year the total budget amount is INR 839,000 while last year it was INR 726,000. Thus the budget amount for this year is about 1 lakh more than last year.

Q11. You said before that you would like to move Shikshamitra into another apartment. How is that plan coming along?
We have been trying to rent a bigger apartment for some time now. However, we are facing problems in this endeavor. The apartment owners are reluctant to rent it to us, thinking that being an NGO we might have some political connections, which they are not very comfortable with.

Budget approval: 15 votes were received favoring release of funds (INR 839,000) to Swanirvar-Shikshamitra for the financial year 2013 - 2014. No vote against the budget approval was received. The voters comprise volunteers from Asha-UFlorida (stewarding chapter) group, as well as Asha-wide groups. Thus, with 15 votes approving Swanirvar - Shikshamitra 2013 -2014 budget, and no votes or concerns against it, the budget is considered approved.

"Yes" votes favoring fund release were received from:

1. Lokendra C. Bengani (UFlorida)
2. Meera Sitharam (UFlorida)
3. Ajoy K. Saha (UFlorida)
4. Sushrusha Nayak (UFlorida)
5. Amey Barde (UFlorida)
6. Rajeev Annaluru (MIT/Boston)
7. Padmanava Sen (Atlanta)
8. Anuradha Bulusu (Atlanta)
9. Nikhil Bojja (Stanford)
10. Prajeep Jayaraman (Stanford)
11. Manideepa Mukherjee (Yale)
12. Ravi Kandikonda (Dallas)

Asha-Sanfrancisco voted in favor of Shikshamitra budget approval:
Yes – 3, No – 0, Abstain – 0.