

## Conference call with Jeevan Gnanodaya

8<sup>th</sup> July 2008

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### On the call:

Aravind, Shankar (from Asha-UC), Mekala (Cornell), Padmanava (Atlanta), Meenakshi (UFlorida), Charanya, Ashwin, Ganesh (Austin) and Mr. Devarajan from Jeevan Gnanodaya (JG)

**Note:** All action items have been highlighted in blue.

There were two parts to the call:

- [1] Questions related to JG Work an Hour (WAH) submission.
- [2] Questions related to newly hired (ISL trained) teachers.

For easy reading, the minutes will also be broken into Parts [1] and [2]. Thanks to Mekala, for preparing minutes for Part [1], and to Aravind, for doing the translation in parallel on messenger.

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### Part [1]: JG – WAH submission

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#### [1] What is the status of the Home for the mentally ill? Is there one in the first place?

[A] The home for the mentally ill currently has 18 children who are day scholars. Mr. Devarajan called them mildly' mentally challenged and they attend classes with the regular classes for the deaf and hearing impaired children. The school began at the request of parents in the nearby areas since there is no other such facility for these children close by. The school does not have formal government sanction as of now. He hopes to have a dedicated facility for these children in the next year or so.

#### [2] What funding comes in from the government?

[A] The government funding is mainly for food. They cover the expenses of about 30% of the children in the age group 6-16 years. This is funding under a scheme for schools with hostels and the grant received is called a maintenance grant. Mr. Devarajan mentioned that the amount of money he gets from the government is about Rs. 70,000, but getting this involves beating a lot of red tape and bureaucracy. There is no government support in terms of books etc. He has been getting this grant for the last 7 years now.

#### [4] What is the status of collaboration with Atlanta or any other chapter for the WAH proposal?

[A] Atlanta and Cornell have decided to submit a joint proposal for WAH. The money Atlanta sent them for the van (\$7K) has reached them, using which they have placed a down payment for the van. JG has purchased a van a few months ago and they are in the process of paying for it on a monthly basis using money from the JG trust. Therefore the remaining money for the van (roughly \$10K) is still needed by JG and they have no other donors for this money. If they receive this money, they should be able to pay up the entire amount needed for the van and no longer need to pay these monthly installments.

#### [5] Clarify on current situation with furniture and whether the new ones from WAH proposal would replace the current ones?

[A] The furniture that Shankar saw on his visit to the school was furniture taken from the nursery and primary school and being used temporarily in the deaf school. They have still to secure funding for the furniture they need for the deaf school and ITI. Hence they still need all of the money requested in the budget sent to Cornell.

#### [6] Upload missing documents to the webpage, once the Cornell volunteer comes back from the site visit.

Mr. Devarajan expects to have audit reports for each of the chapters supporting them ready by the end of

the week. He plans to scan and email the reports to us, so we should have everything in time for the WAH kickoff.

The action items as of now (for Asha Cornell and Atlanta) are:

- [1] Upload a new proposal on the project webpage, with Cornell and Atlanta's joint budget.
- [2] Upload project documents on the webpage once we get them from Mr. Devarajan.

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## **Part [2]: Newly hired sign language teachers, etc.**

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### **What has been happening at your school since the last call?**

The school reopened on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2008. 4 teachers from Coimbatore and 3 from Kanyakumari joined the school. These are ISL trained teachers. The teachers who were there before, are those that have been trained at JG itself i.e. they don't have formal training themselves. The new ones are formally trained. There are 36 students extra who've joined the school, the strength in class 10 this year is 13 (?) more than what it was last year. Total strength of the school is around 160 or so (~130 last year). They now need more teachers, as technically they need to maintain a teacher for every 7 deaf kids (govt. regulation). So the new people fill the gap to an extent. Some teachers from last year have left as well (we discussed reasons in a previous call).

He also introduced the new teachers, their names, what classes they have been designated to and such. There were only 2 teachers for the ITI last year, now it is four. 3 new teachers for ITI center, 2 more for primary school. They've introduced new classes like drawing and sign language. Classes go on from morning until 1:00 pm, 1-2 is lunch, sign language classes later in the afternoon. They have mid terms next month. This will be a useful way to find out if there is any improvement in children and also to measure teachers' effectiveness.

### **Didn't you plan to have an orientation kind of thing for the incoming teachers? Someone from Madras was supposed to come and give orientation to the new teachers, regarding methods of teaching, how to handle deaf children and such. Did that happen?**

No, we have planned to defer that temporarily. The main reason is that we will have to pay that teacher Rs.2000 every week, making it Rs.8000 for four visits. In addition to that, we will need to arrange for their transportation, etc., thereby adding to costs. We are considering ways to bring this expense down, like sending our teachers to their place (which will save on transportation costs), etc. Hopefully, we will be able to do this soon sometime. Basically, we want to be sure of their financial situation before conducting the program. (Dr. Vasishta had asked some questions regarding the background of this expert who was to provide the orientation. They haven't gotten a chance to find this out.)

### **Where are the new teachers accommodated?**

The gents are in the ITI. The ladies are given a room in the hearing impaired school. JG has extra expenses now – accommodation, food for teachers, etc.

### **How have the new teachers reacted to JG? Are they happy with the place? Have they by any chance suggested any changes to curriculum, etc.?**

Yes, they seem to be doing fine. They suggested a lot of extracurricular activities like drawing, painting, games, etc., in addition to whatever is there. JG is trying to incorporate some of it. But they're going slow on such things, one reason being that some old teachers feel too much extracurricular stuff may give children very less time to focus on acads. So, in order to take into account everyone's opinion, Mr. Devarajan is trying to tread a fine line for now.

### **In May, we had given your questions from Dr. Madan Vashishta, about the background of teachers who trained the recruited teachers. Do we have replies for all of that?**

They are trained up to B.Ed level. During the training period, they are trained in sign language only in one period during the day. The teacher who trained them was himself deaf. The teachers have been taught

Indian sign language. There was one lady and one gentleman who trained these teachers. The lady (Mrs. Poongothai) has normal hearing. The male teacher is deaf. Both of them are fluent in sign language and are considered experts. They have been trained in the same university where the new teachers are trained. Unlike the teachers that JG has recruited, who don't have experience and have only undergone Level A of ISL training, Mrs. Poongothai and the other male teacher have gone through all levels (A thru' C), and have a teaching experience for four years.

**How do you judge them to be fluent?**

Mainly by observing them, I had gone to see them teach during my visit to Coimbatore. When I'd spoken to them, they gave a lot of info about sign language training.

**On course curriculum, etc.**

They start with alphabets and small words. The full sign language course has 13 chapters. We teach first alphabets, then words, then sentences, then codes for states and countries, then vegetables, equipment, etc.

**How advanced does it go? E.g., what does the 13th chapter have?**

It is mostly new words and improving vocabulary. However, this sign language training covers only how to sign individual words. It doesn't cover making complete sentences and paragraphs. There are different levels in sign language training – A, B, C; the recruited teachers are trained only up to the A level. Only the experts who trained the teachers are trained up to C level. It will however take about 2 years for the kids to complete the first level itself. Following that, JG will have to consider hiring experts to help them proceed further. One possibility is to ask Mrs. Poongothai herself to help them in some way. But nothing substantial has been worked out as yet.

**Currently, how are the sign language classes being taught? Is the same thing being taught to everyone?**

They've split classes into two sections – 1 to 5 and 6 to 9. They are not teaching this to Class 10 currently. Grades 1-5 go at a slower pace than grades 6-9. They are doing the transition into sign language slowly so that kids don't lose ability to speak.

**One feedback from Dr. Vasishta has been that all teachers and administrators must be fluent in ISL so they can communicate with children there. What do you think?**

Currently, we are using speech mostly. We are going step by step. That's why they're having only one period in a day where sign language is used. The school, right from day one, has been functioning with the philosophy that children should be helped to make them speak. We do not want the new curriculum to take things away from that. Some old teachers also are in favor of introducing changes slowly, so children continue to feel motivated to speak, and at the same time, can learn ISL and what not.

**So what do you tell your older teachers when they say they are concerned children will lose the motivation to speak?**

Well, even I have the same concern, but I'm not sharing it with them yet, just so the teachers do not get discouraged. We will observe the kids for some time and see.

**What exactly is the concern?**

It is a fact that children prefer signing to talking. It is easier. Let's say someone wants to complain of fever. They have two options – say that they've fever (in Tamil), or sign the same in English. We think they should be able to do the former as well.

**How have the students reacted to introduction of signing?**

For the kids, this is an easier job. Most of them like to sign rather than speak. It is the lazier option. In fact, they have been learning signs very fast. The teachers have given feedback that the response is rather satisfactory, and everyone is learning fast. This is good on one hand, but as explained earlier, we want to remain conscious about maintaining a balance. We always have that in mind.

**There had been a suggestion to make JG a learning organization, where teachers meet to discuss amongst themselves the various challenges they face, how each one solves them and such things.**

Yes, they have started doing something like that. He will talk more about this during the teachers' meet he had convened later in the day. He will try it out for a while, and will tell us how things went. He however sees the value in the suggestion, as the teachers are fairly fresh to teaching profession itself, and have quite a lot to learn.

**Quoting Dr. Vasishta, "Having a deaf role model in school will help children's self esteem, which is very important for learning."**

Correct, and I had even planned on asking my son to undergo the A and B (deaf people are not eligible to take C) levels of training at the Coimbatore university. For this purpose, we had gone to the university some days back, to finalize his admission. Turns out, that there is no one who wants to undergo a full course in ISL, and that there is not much demand for the course. Many teachers prefer to do what the recently hired teachers have done – take just the A level course, where they learn ISL during only one period a day. So, his admission is currently being processed, not sure what'll happen. If there are too few people registered, they may not offer the course.

**Did implementing home visits take off?**

He had already spoken about this with his teachers. He had floated the idea that he could hire some new teachers to conduct home visits. JG teachers have received the suggestion well, and have even offered to do the home visits themselves (say once in a month or so), since they know JG's children best.

In addition to this, he also has a pilot running in some district (forgot the name) of Tamil Nadu where he has hired some sign language teachers part-time (similar to the ones who have joined the school) to give counseling to parents of deaf children and send them to the school here. This is a recent development, and will be extended to other districts depending on the success.

**Question from Mr. Devarajan, (hopefully Prof. Vasishta can provide inputs):**

As it turns out, the new teachers can only take the ISL training so far. He has heard that there are better trained teachers in Mumbai, who can take this a step further, i.e., will be capable of teaching grammar and sentence construction, etc. to the students. He was wondering if it will be a good investment to get one such expert now, or wait for a little while and then decide. The final goal is that students should be able to read, and write in English, which can significantly better their job prospects.

**Miscellaneous:**

[1] Mr. Devarajan mentioned that he's facing a money crunch with teachers' salaries and asked how much longer it will take for Asha-UC to send funds. We let him know that we will try to get the funds sent 2-3 weeks from tomorrow, when the chapter is hopefully going to approve the funding JG has requested.

[2] Charanya (Austin) spoke a bit about a proposal Austin has been reviewing. Charanya and Ashwin will follow-up with JG personally at a later time.