

Conference call with Jeevan Gnanodaya
20th February 2008

On the call:

Karl, Rekha, Aravind, Sarika and Shankar (from Asha-UC) and Mr. Devarajan (from JG)

Call summary:

Note: All action items are highlighted blue!

Teaching techniques: When a child gets admitted, a medical check up is done to determine the extent of hearing loss, how many ears have gotten affected etc. and appropriate hearing aids are given. Then, they begin with trying to make the child to make sounds – this is hard, especially because some of the sounds need to be gotten out from the stomach, and communication with a deaf child is not easy. The younger the child is, easier it is for it to learn. In fact, this is practically impossible for children above 10 years of age. Once this is done, they try to teach the vowels, and then the alphabets, move on to more complex words (break them by the syllable). They're also taught to distinguish between several emotions, and other sounds which have very similar lip movements. Proper lip reading is taught by taking the aid of a mirror, and helping the child follow the teacher's lip movements on the mirror. Just this would take nearly a year (3 months to get the sound out and 9 months to teach letters and words) for a typical child. Those with moderate hearing loss can do this faster, but most of the children at JG are in the >70dB (profound hearing loss) category.

After this, the child enters 1st grade, where they begin to follow the regular TN state board syllabus. In each grade, before the class begins, the students are encouraged to speak amongst themselves – the teachers ask them casual questions about what they did the previous day, what they ate etc., just so that they make an attempt to speak.

Sign Language Usage: They do not use any formal sign language based teaching in any of their classes. In fact, Mr. Devarajan is not even aware of the existence of one, or its advantages and disadvantages. Gestures (not to be confused with sign language) are used, nevertheless, whenever they are necessary. Students also typically resort to gesture based communication amongst themselves. Speaking is encouraged big, but gestures aids in helping students understand speech.

JG is however open to trying out using sign languages, if convinced right. We explained to them the proven success of sign language based instruction, and how it can help with the learning of a second language. Mr. Devarajan is eager to find out more about this. In fact, he will be visiting a university in Coimbatore shortly, to pick trained teachers for the school. He is also supposed to go and take a look at what the trainees are being taught in the sign language department of the university. However, for him to adopt the same to his school, he feels that he would feel better to visit some school first where this is being practiced. He feels a little unsure about adopting ideas from a book, and would like to go to some such school (that actually implements this), and study their functioning (especially the sign language instruction part) for about a week or so, before making a call on this. All on call agreed that it would be the right approach. We will try to find out what options exist for Mr. Devarajan in this regard and get back to him. If possible, Mr. Devarajan would like us to arrange this visit sometime in April/May, so he could visit the school (potentially with his teachers, since the school will be on leave) and make his stay there more useful.

Issued faced by deaf children in getting into the 'mainstream': If treated well, they really don't have any problems with socializing. Most of the problems are purely because of the communication problem that arises because of their speech and hearing handicap; people tend to get frustrated when there are glitches in smooth communication and this, in most cases than not, takes a turn for the worse. This is by far the largest problem they face while getting into the mainstream. Also, he thinks that if there are too many deaf children at the same place (in a work environment), they tend to form a group and cause problems. He cited some unpleasant experience with a company where a group of deaf workers formed some union and created trouble.

Philosophy behind the proposed yarn factory: The factory will employ not only ITI graduates, but also students who struggle to pass 8th or 10th grade, who otherwise find it really hard to get good jobs. Secondly, no company really comes forward “voluntarily” to give jobs to the deaf. Most jobs are offered on a sympathy factor, which they would like to avoid. Often times, companies prefer to take deaf children from ‘high end’ deaf schools that offer better training and neglect schools like JG. Moreover, JG’s students come from all over the state. Hence, when they find a job, they’re almost always forced to relocate. When they do so, people refuse to take up the role of a ‘local guardian’ (companies invariably ask for one) fearing they’ll get into trouble.

There are also other problems associated with relocation. That would mean that the boy/girl will have to stay by himself and look after all his needs etc. This, Mr. Devarajan believes, they are not in a position to handle. He feels that some kind of supervision (parents or him) is necessary at least until they get married. Also, based on prior experience, he said that when left unattended, deaf children tend to pick up bad habits and begin to become more carefree, thereby putting years of his hard work to waste. Parents support this viewpoint. We asked if it is not possible to teach them to be on their own, as it serves to be a ‘more’ permanent solution – the reply was that there are practical difficulties. Students come from a village background and begin to go astray when they get introduced to the city. All of this, he has seen from experience. He is open to ideas on better ways to handle this problem. **He would be more than happy to implement anything that could help the kids stand on their own after leaving JG. Ideas and suggestions are welcome.**

On the possibility of higher education: Very much possible, there are avenues offered in several colleges. The government is helpful as well. However the job scene looks bleak even after finishing a degree. ITI seems more attractive, they get better jobs.

We asked about students who go to city ‘deaf’ schools – they get to do higher studies, and they do get jobs. But they’re not ‘great’ jobs. People are a bit reluctant to hire them, mainly because of communication problems, and other issues discussed earlier.

On parental involvement in children’s education: He agrees that this is very important. However, nearly 90 (of ~130 students) at JG come from far off places, where they do not have access to good schools for the deaf. So, for all these students, he is the parent. And he seems to be doing a good job because, these kids have been found to do better than the day scholars. For day scholars, parental involvement is very minimal. The problem is mainly with the village culture and their attitude towards their child. Most parents are poor, and work as farmers and laborers, and cannot afford to miss work and come to school to meet the child. Even in the little time they get to spend with the child, they don’t do much. He wishes things could change, but is not very optimistic. He blames the background of the families for this dire situation.

Post call, there was a suggestion (from Sarika) that he could consider the option of home-visits, where teachers from JG go to the child’s home and try to involve the parents in this. **We could try pitching the idea to him and find out what he thinks.**

Management of JG in the future: Nothing planned as yet. But Mr. Devarajan realizes the need to find someone apt to fill in his shoes. He believes his son is not capable of taking up the task.

The call ended after we asked for a formal proposal from him for the next year. **We need to follow up on that. We will also need to request from him progress and expenditure reports for the money sent last year.**

In other news:

1. 10 new students at the ITI. All are 10th grade fail candidates. The year’s new batch will start soon.
2. Over the last two weeks, Mr. Devarajan was traveling across the various districts in TN to identify candidates for the ITI.
3. JG plans to hire 8 to 10 trained (formally certified) teachers for the next year.

[End of minutes].