

Shikshamitra Annual Report 2010-11

Shikshamitra started in 2005 with 17 children who represented different types found in any ordinary school of about 100 students. Throughout these 5½ years, however, the number of students never crossed the limit of 30 children. On an average it was 25, with many migrating to the village or other parts of the city, or simply wanting to stay away from any kind of “enclosed space” or “scheduled time frame.”

We had never wanted a big school but definitely wanted the students to remain constant. Viability of the school was a continuous issue that disturbed us in Shikshamitra. Constant dwindling of the number or students bothered us. Even the teachers came and went so frequently that it was hard to plan ahead.

At the end of 2009 and most of 2010, we spent a great deal of time sitting in different group configurations (among ourselves, students, managing committee, other well wishers) in order to review our goals and weigh all the pros and cons of running the school unit.

By the end of Nov 2010, a number of children shifted their base. A few of them continued, mostly preferring to stay outside, visiting the school once or twice a week. **The daily count of students was a steady 13-15 while the attendance register had 25 names enrolled.** Brainstorming followed. A decision was taken for good after sharing with the students and their parents.

All of a sudden, the attendance was 98%. We gave them quick lessons in the “academics” that would be mandatory and expected in the government schools, visited the government schools to talk about our school philosophy, the present situation and that the students would be enrolling with them. We were there for the children as the transition process took place.

With final exams over, results were given on 17 Jan 2011, the last day of school at Shikshamitra. Along with their report cards and transfer certificates they got 2 photos: a group photograph for the children and a group photo for the parents (taken at a parents’ meeting). ‘The envelopes need to return looking different’, we told them. And they did return, coloured and decorated by the children and their parents!

Days and weeks passed.



Children who need help keep coming back. Some stop to paint, to do a puzzle or some craft. Maura and children (all those who are interested – old ones with their new friends) continue to “get together for art’s sake.”

In fact, though we were all deeply wondering how we could go on from here, we have found that somehow – organically – people seem to understand that we have more time to work on outreach projects now that we are not running our school unit. We have had many phone calls come in each day with offers of working with other organizations who want to learn from us. We are finding a brand new energy around the whole place and it feels positive and forward-looking. It may now be time to concentrate on training and publishing, and developing small projects that carry on the Shikshamitra spirit.

Let the trust in relationship grow, good education will happen. And to grow well, one needs to stay small. Small, but many; there could be many small endeavors – many small Shikshamitras – different in their forms but similar in spirit.

Students now:

Children keep coming back and visiting Shikshamitra and remain involved in various activities according to their capacities. 3 students are continuing with us till their secondary exams in Dec 2011 and Jun 2012.

Pradip and Kakoli Giri gave us the best gift - a drawing book half filled with drawings and writings by them where the last page said:

"We have done our bit. Now it's your turn. The book is all yours – fill it up."

Akash, a little boy, orphaned at birth and brought up by his grandmother, was a 'terror' in the slum due to his abusive language and incessant fighting. He craved love and care. Thrown out of many schools, he finally ended up in Shikshamitra in Apr 2009. A month after closure, a neighbor congratulated us for the massive changes in this boy, who had regained his childhood and is no longer foul-mouthed. He is doing fine in a government school and learning to play basketball.

Sajahan, the oldest student of Shikshamitra, returned to finish taking the secondary exam. But he wanted to be a part of our new journey. So he helped Maura to take art class at another school and Mahua to keep the library in order. He also took part in a puppet making workshop and made presentation on Shikshamitra – both organized by other NGOs.

Ador Naiya, one of the remaining secondary students, also represented Shikshamitra at a panel discussion without much preparation.

Bikey Sardar became the 1st one to pass the secondary exam from Shikshamitra with flying colors. He is now pursuing his studies in a regular HS school. Anita, his sister, is also well received in a govt school and is given responsibilities from time to time.

Babai Das, who was doing an apprenticeship with another NGO, has been absorbed by them. He is continuing to "learn and earn" with them.

Events and Interventions:

Community Library:

Boi-Hoi-Choi, the community library started on 5 May, 2010 with 65 books in a big shopping bag and 2 mats. It ran every Thursday from 3:45 – 5:15 pm at Alipur Junior Sporting club. 1st day there were 28 children within half an hour! The attendance varied between 20 and 40 each week. Most of the regulars were from classes IV-VI. Our children also took lead role in reading out to other children. There were group-readings as well as lone readers. We also had some instant plays based on some of the most popular stories. Once we had a creative writing / drawing class. Each week children used to wait eagerly for the library. We even got a student for our school thanks to this. However, with the closure of the school and Shikshamitra entering a new phase, we had to end the sessions in Jan, 2011. The books were handed over to the club. We hope that it will re-open again may be under the initiative of few of our old students.

Life Skills Orientation in the Community:

3 senior students conducted a survey on how many children in the locality have birth certificates. 3 guardians helped them out. In all, 31 such children were found in the locality.

Our students conducted life skill education sessions for other local teenagers on Nov. 24-25, 2010. The focus was on how to fill up bank deposit and withdrawal forms, and cheques

Baandhanhaara (free of shackles):

A drama based on Rabindranath Tagore's *Murkhu* (illiterate) – is the story of a boy, who even when prodded by his desperate mother to study a little, decides to look outward at nature and the wilderness, and adopt these elements as his teachers. This was part of Chhelebela, an event organized by the Calcutta-based cultural group Happenings on the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath. All the participating schools were asked to take any work by Rabindranath and present it differently. With very little time (roughly one month) in hand we were in a dilemma – but decided to go ahead thanks to constant prodding by Ruchira, our music teacher and a member of Happenings. A lot of hard work put in by Biswajit, Mousumi, Sipra and Bapi, our part-time theatre teacher, and of course the children resulted in a 15-minute play in 22 Aug, 2010.



Art Exhibition(s):

“Growing with Art“ exhibition took place at Shikshamitra on 3 and 4 Sep, 2010. It was an idea that had been brewing in our minds for almost a year. The impetus for the show and open house stemmed from the creative work some of the older students have been doing independently: Noor Islam has been painting various found objects and doing large sketches; Babai Das has been going to Tomorrow's Foundation for training in paper crafts; Buzz Club members were making diaries, coasters and other items. We also invited young artists from partner NGO's to show case their work. This included Raja from Shuktara, Rajesh and Nabin from Suchana and Muneswar from Asha Niketan. We also had paintings from Prabartak. The school

was converted into a gallery and children were assigned suitable roles. Telegraph covered the exhibition in their Metro section. One visitor, who runs Alcha café in Santiniketan, suggested that Noor and Raja do an exhibition there. It took place on 11 and 12 Feb, 2011.

Trainings and Interventions with other organizations – govt and non-govt:

English at IIMC, Joka:

In Aug 2010, a group of students from the Indian Institute of Management, Joka came to Shikshamitra. They wanted to help the young men working at the IIM mess (canteen). These workers wanted to learn English and computers. After a visit to understand the needs we started the class on Teachers' Day with a basic assessment of the students. Our goal was to enable these young men with basic skills in reading and writing and spoken English so that they can communicate more easily with English-speakers (such as foreign students from other countries who visit the campus for exchange programs) and feel comfortable facing job interviews in similar profiles in 3-4 Star hotels.

Materials (typed and in CD's) were made to simulate situations they are likely to encounter. They downloaded the audio materials in their mobiles to practice regularly. The biggest challenge was their work schedules. In spite of that, 6 students completed the 4-month course and 4 of them took the final exam that included written work, conversations with strangers and interview by the IIM students. 2 of them have got jobs in govt guest houses in Hyderabad and



Bangaluru. Interestingly, one student, who could not attend the classes, approached us in Feb 2011, took the exam and passed with flying colors. Good luck to all of them!

With Difficult to Reach Children

Praajak:

The intervention with the children at Malda railway platform in 2008 was completed in Dec 2010. The children took the initiative to visit a book fair where each bought books according to their levels with their savings.

Marfat, Dhuliyán, Murshidabad:

Arup Das of Marfat, Dhuliyán, approached us in Feb 2010 for language training for his teachers working with the young women and adolescent bidi workers in the 6 NFE centers. They were from the Muslim community. Assessment revealed that the girls needed quick and effective language input and therefore Accelerated Reading Writing Program could be the answer.

The teachers, who were young college girls from the same community, along with the supervisors were exposed to Language program by Shikshamitra team in Jun 2010. A follow up visit after a month and half showed eagerness, excitement and beginning of reading in the centers. Repeat demonstrations and interactions with the coordinator continued from Sep 2010 to Jan 2011.

This resulted in every center gearing up in their own way. Girls in some centers could write sentences and read story books while another center had girls writing and making stories! Yet 2 centers out of 4 had teachers still trying to find their feet.

The program continues. A workshop for making appropriate TLM is to happen in near future.

With School-Going Children at Back up Support Centers

Nibedita Seba Mandir:

In Apr 2010, Shikshamitra conducted a highly successful creative writing program in Bangla with the students of classes V-IX at Nibedita. The children got so comfortable and confident writing on their own that they refused help from their teachers later on!

They want to have a similar program in English next year.

In late Aug – early Sep, Mahua and Biswajit conducted a market survey with 13 children in Nibedita Seba Mandir. They had a beautiful display with photographs and a brief but evaluative write-up on the survey as part of their exhibition on Jagaddhatri puja day (15 Nov, 2010 – a big celebration day for them).

Snegam, New Market:

For Snegam children the year ended with 10 sessions of art and craft, one per week. The main agenda was to provide a space for the children to express themselves – a space with no right or wrong way of doing things. Maura was assisted by several Shikshamitra students in this fun filled venture. The classes with songs, dances, lot of colors and some English culminated in an exhibition with a little cultural program. Children who couldn't participate are now asking their parents as well as Snegam to organize more such classes.



Jabala, Murshidabad:

We were approached by GOAL to improve the learning levels of the school-going children served by Jabala in rural Murshidabad. After a need assessment in Oct 2010, we worked out a program for Bangla, math this year and English next year. We have conducted one set of training and a follow up visit so far.

At Govt High Schools

Jagatpur Rukmini Balika Bidyalay, Behala:

For the 1st time a govt school, Jagatpur Rukmini Balika Bidyalay in Behala, approached us for help in Bangla, English, math and history. They had specific issues in each subject where they wanted our input. Shikshamitra provided input for Bangla and math. Sipra and Swati prepared the relevant TLM's and then conducted workshops at Rukmini to show the teachers how to use these TLM's.

Mandra Hazer Ali Smriti Bidyapith, N 24 Pgns

A government aided school in N 24 Parganas with a dynamic Headmaster, Mehboob Hassan, takes care of students coming from very poor background. Observing how challenged his students were with very low acquisition of Bangla, the chief tool of communication, the Headmaster approached Shikshamitra via Swanirvar, for assistance.

The foundation class, i.e. class V, was the focus in this high school. It was decided to do an assessment of Bangla for all students in class V. Out of 140 students, about 60 students were found to have a good grip over the language. The rest 80 were the focus. They were divided into two sections, temporarily, according to their ability. The first section needed to polish their reading and word formation skills while the second had to start from acquisition of letters. All needed to improve their handwriting.



Using the Accelerated Reading Program, the target is to help the children to acquire the basic reading, writing and word formation. Two classes per week, one hour for each section distributed in seven weeks, were decided upon. The language teachers from the school were to be in the class observing the process followed by separate sessions of actual explanations and guidance. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed and the program started. The classroom interactions were lively and learning

happened at a good pace. Children started responding to the program quite well. Children with learning difficulties gathered courage and confidence and picked up the language quickly.

It was difficult to have the observer teachers regularly in the class as the school logistics were poor. 40 – 50% of the teachers were absent, forcing the teachers to substitute in other classes. The headmaster tried his best to manage but could not succeed due to lack of cooperation.

The program started in Mar 2011 and will continue till Jun 2011.

With Swanirvar

Network for High School English Teachers of N 24 Pgns

A growing need was being felt, among English teachers of various high schools in N 24 Parganas, to provide the students with effective reading, writing and speaking skills in English. In 2009, Shikshamitra was asked to intervene by Swanirvar. A survey in 23 schools revealed the following – Most students in class V-VIII have some recognition of English letters of alphabet; can identify some uppercase and lowercase letters and their vocabulary consists of very basic words like cat, bat etc.

The areas of concern were

- pervading phobia of English
- inability to learn all the letters of alphabet in forms of lowercase and uppercase
- poor pronunciation of words, poor reading
- handwriting is illegible

Therefore the demands from the teachers were to make English fun and help them find necessary remedies for the problems mentioned above. The problems that the children faced should actually have been taken care of in the primary years. It was decided to teach those missed concepts in a 3 months intensive remedial program along with the text book, through age-appropriate methods, covering –

- a) A baseline assessment for each class
- b) Acquisition of letters of alphabet and learning to make words phonetically. Taking help of Bangla letters to learn the corresponding English letters.
- c) Learning to improve handwriting and writing lower case letters before capitals
- d) Vocabulary development
- e) Conversations to improve social skills
- f) Sentence construction to story making
- g) Reading and creating appropriate reading materials.

10 English teachers from 12 schools came regularly. 12 Apr and 12 Nov, 2010 were especially devoted to material making. The rest of the days were devoted to introduction of concepts, demonstration by teachers and sharing of their experiences and difficulties in the classes.

End of the year program teaching in 3 schools seemed satisfactory. In between schools were visited to observe and monitor the class transactions.

The English program seems to be most successful in Media High School. The larger outcome was the development of a Foundation Course in English which can be used by anybody wanting to teach Basic English to learners who are 9+.

Network for High School Math Teachers of N 24 Pgns

This was the 2nd year of the network. There were 8 meetings and visits to 3 schools. This year we decided to go class by class. In the last 2 meetings, we made lots of charts, where the key ideas primarily came from the teachers themselves. Many teachers are making TLM's on their own and using them effectively in their classes. Some of them are also getting displayed at school exhibitions. Going forward, in the 3rd year, we intend on having interactive sessions at the schools with the children.

Workshops with Swanirvar:

Apart from the above 2 networks, we also took various workshops for both Primary and KKB depts. of Swanirvar on topics ranging from creative writing to conflict resolution.

Interventions with other organizations and groups

Jagadish Bose National Science Talent Search:

Shikshamitra's 1st interaction with JBNSTS happened in 21 Nov, 2010 when Swati conducted a workshop as part of their teachers' training program. Then in Jan 2011, she went to Coochbihar for do a 1-day interactive workshop with children as well as teachers. Due to train-delays and other problems, math got almost one more day!

In Feb 2011, JBNSTS wanted to designed and produce 60 science kits. Shikshamitra got bulk of the responsibility for preparing the math kits. The Buzz club jumped into action and finished their work precisely and timely. Few ex-students including Bikey, who cleared class X through RMV, also helped out. This was a great learning process for all of us! Next time we will streamline the process much more!!

Children's workshop in summer, 2010: Around Personal History

12 children (11-12 years) from different mainstream schools gathered for a one-day workshop on 14 Jun, 2010. They knew each other a little but did not meet every day.



The workshop begun with each child writing about oneself and keeping it to himself/herself. Trying to observe and assume what the one on the opposite was like, they wrote about each other. Nothing negative could be written. Next, each account was read out and each child, if she / he felt like could read out his/her very own write-up.

Next, focus was shifted from oneself to one's family and personal history – narrating about one's home, people at home, things at home mentioning how old these were and the chronology. Much later they tried to write up one's personal history through the above data. In between, a trip was taken down the very lane where the workshop venue was, asking the children to look at houses and guess their age. The pattern of windows, doors, the building, name were to be considered while doing the exercise. What followed was an interesting account of their observations and rich interaction trying to establish their opinion. Around 5pm, children were tired yet excited and were ready to go home.

Project at Sociology Dept, Jadavpur University

Sociology department at Jadavpur University approached Sudeshna Sinha to teach in the Diploma course in Applied Sociology, (under the UGC Scheme).

The topic was action research. Four classes were taken by Sudeshna Sinha using actual Shikshamitra and other school situations. Problems were stated and students had to prepare their argument in writing after discussion in groups. 2 questions can be used as illustrations, e.g. –

1. I want to start an alternative school for the underprivileged children in Kolkata. To start the school, I am thinking of hiring a professional with a diploma in Applied Sociology. Is it justified? Argue your points.
2. No 2 slums are the same. Keeping this fact in mind choose the factors that are common in all slums and need to be considered before starting an educational program. (This question was used to sum up the discussion on different kinds of slums in a city and their needs).

Other Activities:

Capacity Building Workshops

Sudeshna took a series of workshops on various topics related to teaching and learning over 4-5 months. These included sessions on pedagogy, curriculum, creativity, multiple intelligence and alternative schools. We also had 2 other workshops with HRLN on child rights and with NEEV on whole word approach.

Syllabi

This year we finished the 1st draft of alternative syllabus for Bangla, English, math, environment education and science. This is based on our experience in our own school and focuses on 8-13+ year old children, who are 1st generation school-goers. Each of these syllabi can be covered in approximately 2 years.

Translations/Adaptations

Apart from above, Sibani Pal, an external resource person, translated various pieces from English to Bangla. These include chapters on Kanavu, Sita School and Vikasana from the book *Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India* and an alternative textbook on India's freedom struggle for classes VII-VIII by Sandip Bandyopadhyay.

As we move on, we derive a lot of energy from an observation by Sajahan, a student of Shikshamitra –

It's the way to know oneself and understand what one wants. If one knows himself well, he can understand others better. And when one understands others better, one is in a position to work with many kinds of people in a larger way. That is education.

