



Annual Activity Report April 2006 – March 2007

Suchana continues to run two projects, the Early Learning Group and the Health Project. Both of these projects have been developing over the year, and some new initiatives have been taken. The Executive Committee has continued to meet regularly to discuss developments, plan new activities, and share responsibility for the programme. An AGM was held attended by the Committee and about 50 parents of ELG children. As well as regular business, at the AGM a participatory priority-setting exercise was facilitated in small village and gender-based groups, to help clarify objectives for Suchana in the coming year.

The Early Learning Group

The ELG has run its regular thrice weekly sessions, on Sundays, Wednesdays and sports and games on Fridays. At the beginning of the new school year at the end of April, 40 new children were admitted to the programme, taking student numbers to 106. To prepare for this large number of new entrants, a meeting had been held with parents and guardians, a teachers' planning workshop was conducted, and a new teacher was employed who comes from the same community as most of the newly admitted children. In November, in a mid-year admissions process, a further 8 children joined the ELG.

In addition to these regular sessions, several ad-hoc activities have also taken place, discussed below.

The library

The library has been developing effectively during this period. The books are popular and the children are proving very responsible at bringing them back. Through this system, story books are entering the children's home lives every week, and the literacy effects are tangible in the classroom. In a new initiative, library sessions were timetabled into the Sunday and Wednesday class routine for each class group, and this has greatly facilitated the regularity with which books are accessed. Towards the end of the year, and in anticipation of a further intake of new admissions in April 2007, we began reviewing the library system, to make issues and returns simpler, to organise a rational classification system, and to make it possible for even very young children to use the open-access system. Expert help was taken for this process, spread over three workshop sessions. The first of these, in an initiative both to network and share resources with other organisations, was also attended by a group

of teachers from Antaranga school, a local organisation which is also developing a children's library system.

Sports and Games

The Friday sports and games sessions have also become more established over this period. By October, with between 60 and 90 children attending each session, it was clear that another sports teacher was needed. Although the sports sessions have been effective in attracting girls as well as boys, the Committee decided that it was important to employ a woman teacher to provide the girls with a female role model. From November, the sessions thus had two teachers, one male, one female. Later, Suchana hosted our first inter-village football match, and was very pleased to present a mixed girls/boys football team. In January, we held our first Sports Day. Concerned both to encourage healthy competition, but to balance this with a focus on team work and co-operative skills, a mixture of individual and team events was arranged. 93 children participated.

Educational Trips

The ELG has also undertaken a number of educational local trips and visits. In July, the teachers all visited an urban non-formal education project, Shiksha Mitra, in Kolkata to exchange perspectives, discuss teaching methods for Bengali literacy, and access resources from their resource centre. In August, the ELG children were taken to see a showing of Satyajit Ray's children's film 'Goopi Gayen Bagha Bayen', organised by Bikshan, the Santiniketan film club. In September, the ELG children were taken to visit the circus that performs in Bolpur once every two years. Our annual educational tour and picnic took place in January and consisted of a guided tour of a nearby 350 year old terracotta temple complex, followed by a picnic at Sobuj Bon, an eco-tourism initiative. In February, Classes 2 and 3 were taken to an exhibition of children's art work in Santiniketan, which included some of their own work. This exhibition was an outcome of a series of workshop co-ordinated by Antaranga school in conjunction with Suchana, the Kamalakantapur primary school, and one other local school organisation. Finally, in March 2008, Classes 2 and 3 walked/cycled to the Santal Porob festival celebrations in the neighbouring village. In addition to these excursions, the ELG staff organised and arranged the distribution of a set of clothes and slippers to all 106 ELG children, a Puja gift from well-wishers in Kolkata.

Evaluation

The ELG teachers have been gradually developing systems for evaluating both their own work and that of the ELG children. In October, a workshop was held to undertake a participatory self-evaluation designed to focus on developing strengths, as well as to troubleshoot weaknesses in an open, discursive framework. Later, a further workshop was held to develop and establish a framework for the evaluation of students, in the absence of an examination system which it was felt would be superfluous to introduce. Much of this discussion centred on what the ELG is seeking to develop in the children beyond academic achievement, and how to identify and assess these features. This process was completed with the distribution of student evaluations in November, and a follow-up parent/teacher workshop in December to communicate and discuss what we sought to reward and to gather parents' suggestions for ongoing priority setting.

Annual Show

The ELG Annual Function took place at the end of February, after working on productions and performances since early January. The children sang in Konra,

Santali, Bengali and English, and two class groups performed short plays – one in Bengali and one in English. They also recited poetry and rhymes, and performed a co-ordinated ribbon dance to 'Kumbayah'. Around 400 parents, friends, family and interested parties attended. Perhaps more importantly, in the immediate preparations for the show – preparing art displays, costumes, and decorations – the ELG children displayed high levels of co-operation and initiative, so that the event became an across-the-board team effort.

The Health Project

In April 2007 the health project took an important new step in recruiting a health worker apprentice who has been working with the two health workers for this period, gradually taking on information on the treatment of basic health problems, and being introduced to the local health system services.

Having found that many school-age children were not being properly covered by home visits – because they are at school during the morning programme – the health team arranged to make health visits in the Kamalakantapur primary school once a week. Several cases of skin infection, ear and eye infections, and colds and coughs have been addressed through this system, and then followed up with parents/guardians in the villages. In March, the ELG children were given medical checks by a qualified allopathic doctor in a day-long process. Some children were advised referrals to specialist services which may be able to assist with health problems which interact with and undermine their educational process.

The health team conducted the first in a series of village health workshops for one Suchana village. While local health workshops are often directed at women – because the subject matter often relates to mother/child health issues – we took the step of inviting men to come too, on the basis that since most health decisions ultimately lie in the hands of men, they should not be excluded from health responsibilities and information. A second workshop was also conducted for ELG staff, to advise them on first aid treatment during ELG sessions. The use of some basic herbal and allopathic medicines was explained; emergency first aid was demonstrated; and a system was advised for reporting health issues identified at ELG sessions to the health workers for follow up with parents.

In September we held our second eye camp in conjunction with the subdivisional hospital, to diagnose and organise referrals for a variety of eye problems from cataract to night blindness. 84 patients attended the camp. This was followed in October by a shared-cost refraction testing camp attended by 26 adults after which 16 adults bought glasses offered cheaply by the optician. Two of these were young women who had had quite severe vision problems for years, but no opportunity to address them. It was also decided to test the vision of all 114 ELG children. Little is known about how vision problems interact with others to produce school drop outs, but it is likely that some proportion of school children have problems developing their learning because they cannot adequately see what is written on the blackboard. As a result of the tests, 11 children, or nearly 10%, were identified as needing glasses, and were assisted in acquiring them at a subsidised rate.

Suchana also facilitated 5 more cataract operations at the subdivisional hospital and is preparing to facilitate the hospital in undertaking 10 pterigium operations – a health issue which appears to be increasingly common.

The health workers recently started work on TB, which is still sometimes debilitating in the villages. The first step is to undertake family screening in the villages to identify likely candidates for the first round of TB tests.