

V-EXCEL EDUCATIONAL TRUST, TAMIL NADU

The building stands out with its cheerful yellow and red frontage and matchstick figures creating a resemblance to picture cards or playing blocks. V-Excel Educational Trust of Chennai housed in such a building is a far cry from the often joyless environment of schools meant for children with special needs. But as founder/director, Dr Vasudha Prakash explains, V-Excel is not just a school but a hugely professionally-run institution that grew out of a conviction that every child has the potential to learn and succeed regardless of his/her intellectual abilities. The challenge lies in providing the child with the “least restrictive environment” or what she terms as optimum placement.

A clinical psychologist by training, Vasudha armed herself with a doctorate in special education from Rutgers University, USA, along with years of experience in teaching. This vast resource base comprising material for professional assessment and teaching strategies for different intellectual levels was what she wanted to share with others in India where statistics show that ‘special education’ has remained a relatively low focus area. Along with close friend Geeta Bhalla, the V-Excel Education Trust was set up in 2001.

One of the unique concepts of the institution is the effort to build up a reservoir of special teachers that can tap each child’s potential to the maximum through one of the units – the Academy

of Teacher Excellence (ATE). Most special schools in India evolved because parents were forced to step in as teachers because of a lack of professionals. This places a heavy burden on parents, prevents objectivity and cuts down the growth graft of the child. With its emphasis on quality, ATE aims at giving the education community a set of motivated teachers by offering a year-long diploma program with training in state-of-the-art methodologies and practices. It is the only one that comprehensively covers autism, mental retardation, learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder in one course. Trainees are then provided with a kind of ‘lab school’ through intensive internships at the institute where they get hands-on experience.

The other three innovative institutional units – the Kaleidoscope Learning Centre (KLC), the Bridge Learners Academy (BLA) and the V-Excel Remedial Centre (VRC) – were dictated by addressing various special needs of the child, explains Vasudha. They grew out of having to reject some approaches and responding to others. Thus the KLC with 60 pupils and Geeta Bhalla as principal evolved as a school program for children with autism, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and mental retardation. The BLA with 30 pupils under the care of Nandini Santhanam grew into a school program that addresses the needs of those



Enacting a story at the Annual Day celebrations



Expressing themselves through art and colour



Exercise and sports are an integral part of the therapies

with learning disabilities like dyslexia or overall slow development.

The Remedial Centre began in September 2002 because of the pressing demand to accommodate all the children who could not fit in elsewhere – those who found normal school life to be too daunting and stressful, either because they were dyslexic or slow learners or those who needed school readiness skills. Here 140 children get the benefits of one-on-one sessions as well as a special group.

Disha, a support group for families with special children, grew out of the need to address parents' concerns on how to empower themselves, especially in a state like Tamil Nadu where the social pressure is rather high on a child's ability to read and write rather than to explore other options such as vocational training or addressing the vast social and psychological needs of such children and their families. Disha not only shares information and resources among families, but also

addresses anxieties over "what after us?" questions and dispenses information on legal rights.

V-Excel's innovative approach springs from the way Vasudha and the staff have taken the framework of methodologies from the West and adapted them to suit Indian cultural mores. For example, Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence System that categorizes eight kinds of intelligence has been used to assess and draw up different kinds of programs.

So there is skating therapy to improve body smartness and to address the child's special vestibular sensory needs and there are also classes of customized yoga asanas and aerobics. Nature therapy is used to build inter-personal relations.

"What we do with theory and how we teach is the innovation," explains Vasudha.

In canine therapy, trained dogs help autistic children to relate to objects and understand simple vocabulary through commands to the dog such as, "Sit, fetch, take, come."

In Picture Exchange Communication System, pictures are used as expression. The autistic child is encouraged to begin his own personal album. Used in a trained and systematic way, it has opened up non-verbal channels of communication between parents and child, bringing them closer.

In the Listening Program, the child is made to listen to different sound frequencies to help the mind get used to different sounds so that concentration improves. Of course occupational and speech therapies play a major role as well.

The emphasis is on a multi-dimensional approach with several types of interventions such as biomedical ones where the diet is modified with zinc supplements to remove fungal residues, or Green Therapy which encourages children to watch the miracle of a seed sprouting to a plant, and social skill classes where children are taken on shopping trips or the bank. Even modern IT technology with MSN chat is being explored as a way of furthering conversation among autistic children.

Parents are given valuable inputs to help children groom themselves or to get them to behave during structured socialization such as attending a wedding or a shopping excursion. A lesson in Circle of Friends enables them to get valuable lessons on how to protect themselves from molestation and abuse. One of the major innovative therapies of the past year – adapting the Montessori method for children with special needs – has met with good response especially for those

with autism.

This broad spectrum and “almost stupidly impractical intense ratio of teachers to children” has been possible because of the grant of Rs 5.40 million from the JRD Tata Trust. It has been used entirely for operational expenses, the salaries of speech and occupational therapists and some of the teachers. Says Vasudha, “I don’t know how we could have done without this support. We would have had to cut down on therapies and would not have had this beautiful outcome.”

The feeling is echoed by several parents in whose lives small miracles keep unfolding.

Says Padmasini, mother of seven-year-old Vishnupriya, “She used to cry non-stop before. I even contemplated suicide. Today thanks to Nandini Santhanam, Nafisa and Priyanka who dealt with her she has settled down. When she says, ‘Amma beach’, I know that she is communicating with me and I happily take her there. Her crying spells have lessened. She can read and write. I feel I belong to the large family of V-Excel.”

Sundaresan says there has been a quantum leap in his nine-year-old autistic son’s sensitivity. “I despaired of Amruth ever showing any emotion or values. Today he responds even though he cannot speak fully. He has started verbalizing. V-Excel has spotted his unique spark of gravitating towards music. I am confident my dreams of an honourable life for him are entirely possible.”



Children ‘row a boat’ as a part of learning



Canine therapy helps autistic children to relate to objects and words