



V-Excel Educational Trust

#10/23, Sharada, Thiruvengadam Street,
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India

Activity Report ***2013-14***



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V-Excel Educational Trust Annual Activity Report: 2013 - 2014

Significant Events

Town Hall Meeting: V-Excel's annual year-end meeting with the entire staff from all its seven centres proved to be a true meeting of the hearts and minds, creating a new pulse for the journey ahead. Every department had the opportunity to share their success stories with the rest of the team. Some stories made us laugh, some surprised us, some brought out the sheer grit and determination of our teachers, and some made us introspect, but in all the voices we heard, what rang out the loudest was the sense of pride!

Asha Foundation: The ASHA for Education, Seattle, hosted a charity musical night on 19th April, with V-Excel as their 'Project Spotlight'! As part of their four-hour music extravaganza, that saw a packed house with 800 music enthusiasts, ASHA presented V-Excel and played our 20-minute film titled 'A Symphony of Silence' (watch the video here: <http://www.v-excel.org/potpourri/videos.shtml>), which received a standing ovation! Currently, ASHA funds \$14,000 towards V-Excel's annual expenses.

Sports Day: Held on September 28 at YMCA Nandanam, Chennai, Sports Day was based on the theme of "The Number 7" and had over 100 children participating. Interesting drills, races and presentations were woven around this theme (seven colours of the rainbow, seven celestial bodies, seven notes of music, seven days of the week and seven epochs) and all the children, parents and guests enjoyed this lovely show of abilities. We had Dr. C. Sylendra Babu, Additional D.G. Police (IPS, Coastal Security) as our Chief Guest and Mr. Balasubramanian, (Marathon Runner), Ms Lakshmi Shruti Settupalli (international Squash player) and Mr. Ramana (GM & Head, Corporate Communications L&T Construction) were the Special Invitees.

The Wipro Chennai Marathon: At the country's second largest marathon, 14 children from V-Excel - 8 from the Kaleidoscope Learning Centre and 6 from our Vocational Training Unit – participated in the 'Run for Special Children'. Two of our trainees from VTU won the first and second place in the Special Needs Persons category!

Tarang: To mark World Disability Day on December 3, V-Excel Educational Trust, in association with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, launched TARANG, a cultural initiative exclusively for persons with special needs and their caregivers. It was launched by V-Excel's brand ambassador, Bombay Jayashri, along with Guests of Honour, Mr. N. Murali, Co-Chairman of Kasturi & Sons Limited,

and Mr. Ravi, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindu. After the traditional lighting of the lamp, there was a soulful performance by pianist, Anil Srinivasan, and dancer Priya Murale enacting the story of the Lion and the Mouse.

Once a month, BVB will open its doors to persons with special needs in the city for a free musical concert organised by V-Excel. Through this one-of-a-kind project, V-Excel hopes to provide equal opportunities for people with special needs, fostering awareness in society, promoting healing and therapeutic effects of the performing arts in special education, and most importantly, providing a forum for the seamless integration and transition of people with disabilities and mainstream society.

V-Excel's Youth Empowerment Services Centre: *On January 26, V-Excel Educational Trust, along with Dr. & Mrs. Sudhir Krishnamurthi, launched our second Youth Empowerment Services Centre in Mylapore, a state-of-the-art vocational and life-skills training centre for young adults with special needs.* It allows V-Excel to expand its existing vocational training services located in Shastri Nagar, where many of the trainees earn stipends and are making significant strides towards independent living. The units in Shastri Nagar and Mylapore will work in tandem with the former focusing on production work and the latter on training. Our Chief Guest for the occasion was Hon'ble Mr. Justice S. Ranganathan, Former Judge, Supreme Court of India, while the Guests of Honour were Mr. Harish Mehta, Chairman, Indian Red Cross Society, Ms. Malvika Iyer, Bomb Blast Survivor, Ph.D in Disability & Inclusion, Motivational Speaker and Social Worker, and Sri.S.Ramakrishnan of Amar Seva Sangam.

Spice Jet: The Rotary Club of Madras East (RCME) and SpiceJet gave the gift of experience to 18 developmentally challenged children who have never been on an airplane before by flying them to Madurai and back! Thanks to the efforts of Mr. T. Muthukumar, past President of RCME, Mr. Sudhakaran, the current President of RCME, Rotarians Mr. S. Sudhir and Mr. S. S. Rajsekhar, these children benefited from this once-in-a-lifetime experience. The children, mostly those with Autism and Mental Retardation, along with five members of staff from V-Excel, visited the Gandhi Museum and Nayakar Mahal in Madurai, before they took the evening flight out to Chennai.

Blue Sky Unplugged Concert: *A very 'special' choir of autistic children, along with some of their teachers, performed, for the first time on March 23, for an external audience at Isha Life, Mylapore!* This was the first time that our children were stepping outside the safe environment of home and school to perform for an external audience and it certainly was a milestone moment for us at V-Excel, a testimony to our core vision of integrating individuals with special needs into mainstream society. With a repertoire of songs both well-known and those composed specifically for the children by our teachers, the music came straight from the heart, speaking the language of gestures, taps and claps, making this choir truly one-of-a-kind.

Salem trip: At 2 p.m. at Chennai's Central station, there was a special buzz in the Chennai-Salem train. 17 of VTU's trainees, along with a small group of volunteers and teachers, went on their first overnight trip to Athur in Salem! The trip included a visit to a pottery village, a dairy farm. the

Sago (starch) factory, a carpentry workshop and short trek through the picturesque landscape of Athur. Another milestone for us as we take steps towards fostering inclusion and cultivating independence for individuals with special needs.

- **IPMT:** The annual International Post Graduate Medical Training (IPMT) programme, organised by the Anthroposophic Medical Society (AMS) Chennai Chapter, was held between November 19 and 27, at the Yellow Train Waldorf School in Coimbatore. This was the third consecutive year that the staff of V-Excel was an active part of the organising committee, and helped manage yet another successful IPMT programme.
- **Facebook:** V-Excel now has an official Facebook page! We request you to please support us and 'Like' the page. This is our only official page that has all the updated information, news and communication from V-Excel. Here is the link: <https://www.facebook.com/freehearts>. We hope to see you there soon!
- **Sharada:** Grades 4A and 4B were the chosen classes to inaugurate the new furniture in V-Excel's brand new school building – Sharada – on January 27, 2014. Thanks to the generous contribution of the United Way of Chennai, the elegant furniture that has been donated will go a long way in making the environment orderly and structured.

From Our Departments

- **Course Call:** The "Certificate in Early Childhood Special Education Enabling Inclusion- MR" through Distance Mode (an IGNOU and RCI affiliated course), has been yet another feather in ATE's cap. Also, the Parents Awareness Programme was officially inaugurated on December 14 by C. Jasmine, the District Differently-abled Rehabilitation Officer. 15 students who had enrolled from Chennai were present, while 20 other students who have registered from Erode and Tirunelveli were there in spirit. This year, for the first time, this three-month course in Distance Mode, was also offered in Tamil
- **First Aid:** A two-day course on 'First Aid, CPR and Safety' organised by ATE for the staff of V-Excel was conducted on March 21 and 22, 2014. Thanks to experienced trainers from St. John's Ambulance, Mr. Kumaraguru, Mr. Chandran, Mr. Soundararajan, and Ms. Lakshmi, it was interactive and informative, giving the 60 participants who attended valuable insights on First Aid.
- **Continuous Rehabilitation Education in Autism Spectrum Disorder (CRE-ASD) programme:** From February 10 to 12, 2014, V-Excel was proud to organise and host the Continuous Rehabilitation (CRE) programme on Inclusive Education for Autism Spectrum Disorder. With 41 participants, several eminent speakers and resource persons, the CRE programme was a heady mix of great content and active participation.
- **V-Excel Satellite Centres:** With increasing demand in India's small towns for accessible and good special education services, a special school was launched in Nashik. Parents from some of our remedial groups were the impetus behind this initiative. The academic year began with 16 students! We shifted to new premises in Tirunelveli and children are settling in there after the summer break.

Given the profile and background of the children coming for therapy and educational inputs, we have subsidized many services for their benefit. After months of looking for a larger, more suitable space for a special school, we are delighted to announce that a space has now been found in Solapur! If you would like to fund equipment or help in any other way, write to info@v-excel.org

- **Grandparents Day:** A unique event was conducted by the counsellors to provide a platform to the family members of our children with special needs. The concerns and issues faced by them are unique and in this case too, being the immediate extended family, the grandparents were found to be deeply affected and openly shared their feelings.
 - **Parent art therapy:** Parent Art therapy sessions have been one of the counselling department's success stories, as parents have found these sessions extremely de-stressing.
 - **Book club:** This unique initiative by the Counselling Unit was a result of their understanding that children do enjoy listening to stories. The sessions, conducted every Saturday morning, also include some craft based on the story.
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- **The Great Outdoors:** Grade 4 of KLC went on a successful overnight trip with teachers as part of their life skills programme to Yelagiri. Two batches of ten children and four teachers went for their Nature Walk to the Guindy National Park. The Park's history and spread of greenery, along with photographer, 'Poochi' Venket as a guide, made for an exciting two-hour walk!
 - **Founder's Day Artwork:** On June 10, the whole school contributed to the Founder's Day poster, under the guidance of Puja Bhalla, psychologist and therapist who had just returned from attending her second module on Art therapy in Australia. The poster came alive with pictures of children gaily playing around a colourful pole with ribbons. The poster represents the world of a child and says, "All we need is joy, a little hope and someone to believe in us".
 - **Ship Shape:** On February 5, trainees were taken on an experiential learning trip to the naval ship INS Vikrant & INS Delhi. Vikrant is the first aircraft carrier to be designed by the Directorate of Naval Design of the Indian Navy and the first warship to be built by Cochin Shipyard. Trainees, along with their teachers, were taken around the ship to see the aviation facilities of the aircraft carrier and they quite enjoyed their climb in and out on the deck!
 - **Earth Bound:** The trainees at VTU have become actively involved with gardening. They learnt to make a bed with organic material and sand, prepared it further by watering it for a week, and then learnt to sow seeds and saplings. As part of this gardening project, trainees were also taken to the beach to collect biodegradable waste. They ended up collecting a lot of corn cobs strewn around Besant Nagar beach, which was later used in the compost pit at the VTU centre.
 - **Valentine's Day:** VTU celebrated Valentine's Day with a difference with a picnic organised for the parents of the trainees! A trip to the farmhouse with some fun and games and delicious food left the parents cheerful and rejuvenated.

Partners and Donors

- Thanks to sponsorship by United Way of Chennai, our teachers and students saw a beautiful global acrobatic show by Extra Terrestrials presented in the Music Academy on the 13th of June. The raving reports of the show indicated how every minute of the planning and organizing process was worthwhile!
- Erode Centre has now got equipped with a computer, printer, water purifier and an inverter, thanks to the support from one of our donors.
- ESVI Sarada Foundation has generously donated a machine to the VTU to make eco-friendly leaf cups. Training of students has already begun.
- Mr. Harinarayan Masand of Suryakiran Playsystems & Co. donated multi-play equipment for the school at Nashik.
- A cross-partnership between Pudiyador, an NGO working with underprivileged children, and V-Excel commenced this year. Pudiyador runs after-school activities for children and wanted help with identifying, assessing and helping children with learning difficulties. Pudiyador offered us services in the areas of gardening and theatre for our children at the Kaleidoscope Learning Centre and the Vocational Training Unit.
- In partnership with Nizhal – Friends of Trees, children of Grades 4 A and B were actively involved in clearing, planting, watering and digging the soil at the park in Kotturpuram. Nizhal helps our children identify spots and the children get a real experience of hard work by using their hands to till the soil. Many children have commented on the therapeutic aspect of farming.

Staff Training

- All KLC teachers, therapists and counsellors attended two enriching workshops, one by Hemangi, a trainer from Mumbai, who explored working with wood and making paper lanterns, and the other with Katherine, a US-based trainer, who demonstrated an entire circle time session and main lesson in math.
- VRC teachers attended a workshop conducted by one of our counsellors on the 'why' and 'how' aspects of wet-on-wet painting. It was an extremely interactive and insightful session which helped teachers to work with deeper understanding of colours.
- An art therapy session, along with de-stressing activities, was held for the support staff of V-Excel. The Akkas, who all-year through support the children in every way, had a well-deserved relaxation time and thoroughly enjoyed the new experience!
- Three of our staff members visited a few vocational units in Bangalore to observe the work done at these centres and exchange valuable experiences and ideas for the future. They also attended a workshop held at SAP Labs on the extremely relevant topic of Autism @ Work.
- Michael Kokinos, an Anthroposophic Physiotherapist from Australia and Lakshmi Prasanna conducted a workshop on Rhythm and Movement for the entire staff of V-Excel, showing us the incredible correlation between outer and inner rhythms.

Community Impact

- Our signature workshop series 'A Class Apart' for regular school teachers was conducted this year. This training programme is planned jointly with Kuruvilla Jacob Initiative and is designed to see how teachers can bring life into teaching. Many schools in Chennai have found the program extremely useful and have sent their teachers for participation.
- St. Ebbas, an inclusive school, had been requesting V-Excel to conduct a one day training programme for their Teacher Assistants on listening skills, being conscious of the children's needs, attitude towards work and a brief outline of different disabilities. This was held on the 19th October '13 and about 35 teacher Assistants and 5 Special Educators attended.
- Two senior teacher trainers from Sacramento – Lorie Hammond and Crystal Olson – spent a day in our school on November 12. They observed our children during their main lesson and their wet-on-wet painting session, and spent some time with us sharing their views on using the arts in the curriculum for special children.
- At the Nashik centre, on January 9, two special educators and two counsellors of the Special Education Department of Silver Oak Universal School visited the centre. The purpose of the visit was to familiarise themselves with the centre's activities so they could refer some of the special children studying in their school for therapies and remedial activities at our centre.
- A workshop for primary school teachers was conducted at the Erode centre. Around 14 teachers working with children in the age group of one-and-a-half years to four years from four different schools attended the programme. Training for the staff at the Erode centre on drafting IEP'S (Individualised Education Programme) for children was also conducted.
- Mrs. Jayanthi Vishwanath presented a talk on 'Autism today' at a two-day seminar in Nashik on 'Learning issues of children and youth' organised by Mumbai's Don Bosco Counseling Group on 28th-29th September 2013. On March 23, Jayanthi Vishwanath, Coordinator of the Nashik centre, presented a seminar on "Changing Paradigms of Child Development" for the parents of Delhi Public School in Nashik. The programme seemed to be an eye-opener for young parents and received wide press coverage.

Success Stories

- Withun, a child from China, came for a three-week review programme on early intervention and the sessions impacted him so deeply that he ended up drawing all the staff he interacted with. He has now started attending regular school and keeps in touch with the teachers through email.
- VTU has opened a new production wing 'Samarth'. Five of our trainees have now been graduated as interns at Samarth, a workplace where they recreate what they learnt during their training period.

Several orders have already started coming in, from sticking 4,500 paper postal envelopes for a Tamil magazine, making 100 candle bags with bead work and 100 key bags, to making eco-friendly calendars, eco-friendly bags, cutting vegetables for a catering unit, and participating in the two-day 'Arunim' sale organised at Larsen and Tubro campus in Chennai.

- A significant positive development was seen with a number of the young adults of Grade 5 who seem to be ready to communicate with the outside world! Till now it was only a few chosen teachers that the children communicated with, but it seems like they have developed confidence enough to say, "now bring on the world and we will converse with them"., demonstrated by Amruth Sunderesan and Vijayshraavan who typed to have a conversation with a journalist in a first-time ever episode!
- Chinmayee Ramanathan, Thulasi Raman and Divya, all students of KLC, won prizes in an inter-school cultural meet called Javate, organised by Lady Andal School, a first in the history of KLC. Chinmayee fought his autism to look deep into a stick which he held in his hand instead of the mike and sang 'Hey Jude' by the Beatles, accompanied by his teacher, Neha Bhalla, on the guitar. Thulasi played the Mridangam and Divya got the first prize for her painting of a garden. Congratulations to all the winners and other participants too!
- When Saravanakumar came to V-Excel's Remedial Centre, he was eleven years old, attending a mainstream school, and was diagnosed with a learning disability. "He had the skills of a Grade 1 child. He couldn't read or write or comprehend and was very de-motivated and surly, with low self-esteem," explained Jayanthi Srinivasan, Coordinator of VRC. For the next three years, Saravanakumar went through an intensive remedial programme at the centre, after which, Saravanakumar was promoted from Grade 9 to 10, completely on merit!