



## V-Excel Educational Trust

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### ***Activity Report*** **2008-09**



## Table of Contents

V-Excel Educational Trust .....	3
Annual Report: Year 2008-09.....	3
Events: Some fun, some learnings, and a lot of community interaction .....	3
Activities: Spreading awareness and equipping influencers in children’s lives.....	4
Supporters: Thanks to their backing, our efforts got a remarkable boost! .....	5
Partners: Without them, we would never be able scale greater heights! THANKS.....	6
Kaleidoscope Learning Center (KLC) : .....	6
Bridges Learning Academy (BLA) .....	7
V-Excel Remedial Center (VRC).....	7
Academy for Teacher Excellence (ATE): .....	8
Counseling and Assessment Unit (C & A) .....	8
Vocational Training Unit (VTU) .....	9
Early Intervention (EI) .....	9
Rural Outreach - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA):.....	10

## V-Excel Educational Trust

### Annual Report: Year 2008-09

Our goals this year were establishment of the three relatively new services (Counseling & Assessment, Early Intervention, Vocational Training) and quality upgradation of existing key services (Special School, Remedial Intervention, Learning Disabilities Center, Rural Outreach Program, Teacher Training). Keeping this in view, our main focus areas thus comprised of resource development, student enrichment and parent empowerment.

The year began with a unique in-service program beautifully blending one's personal awareness and growth, with the organization's vision and mission. All our teachers, therapists and other staff members enthusiastically participated in this intense workshop by Dr. Lakshmi and Michael. A wonderful synergistic cross-functional working structure emerged from this workshop that put the child first and at the center, with various services and therapies designed around it to fit themselves to the child's specific needs. We integrated many of the concepts learnt into our individualized planning for special children. Six months down the new academic year, we reassembled to take the exercise one step further and emphasized the Curative Education philosophy for our children. Many other developmental programs were conducted during the course of the year and these have been elaborated under relevant service units.

Experiential learning is an effective technique for all of us and our children are no exception. In fact, with the restricted verbal communication and cognitive abilities, these children benefit immensely from any exposure, may it be in terms of field trips or event participation, or even festival celebrations. Such occasions are potent teaching media for a number of skills including motor (gross and fine), functional independence, behavioural, emotional, social and the like. The year 2008-09 saw a premeditated spurt in such events. The details follow in ensuing pages.

As a part of our initiative to empower parents of children with Autism, we not only discussed various basic facts and information about autism, but brought in a fundamental perspective change. Rather than viewing themselves as being chosen to help the children, educators and parents need to understand that the children around us give us an opportunity to have varied experiences that teach us valuable lessons, which in turn help us to live life at a more 'conscious' level, and to spiritually advance ourselves. Effectively, this helps parents take away the psychological stress and genuinely enjoy their wards as 'children'. Counseling and home based programs helped boost their confidence in dealing with their children in different settings.

### Events: Some fun, some learnings, and a lot of community interaction

Carnival - It was also a wonderful context for our children to socialize, integrate, enjoy, learn and participate in the fun filled carnival. Products made by our children included paintings, colourful paper jewellery, pen stands, block printed gift wraps, presentation envelopes, gift tags, notepads, letter writing paper and book marks. We got raving reviews from people who visited it.

In June, the Founder's Day was celebrated. We conducted an Art activity, involving the whole school, in which a 'Tree of children' with personalized colours was created and put up at the entrance of the school.

A Dental Camp was organized by Dun and Bradstreet, followed by an eye camp by

Dr. Agarwal's Eye Hospital. All the children in our care underwent the checkups. Water Day held on 31st July '08. The heat of Chennai was combated with splashing, squirting, pouring and getting thoroughly wet. Teachers and students became one as water continued to create its fun.

The Independence Day on 15th August - Children were looking their original pure selves in white dresses, excitedly waving out the national 'tiranga' (tricolour flag). Some children sang, few performed while others did a march past.

On September 5<sup>th</sup>, Teacher's Day, there was a special treat for all the teachers and staff of V-Excel and the special educators from the rural SSA program. The trip to a

resort in Mamallapuram was a time to get to know people of other service units, have fun and enjoy sumptuous food. It was truly a memorable day for all of us!

Flower filled 'Onam' celebration where the children decorated a huge 'Pookolam' (flower rangoli) in the school foyer. Teachers out did themselves dressed in traditional costumes and performed a 'Kaikottikali' (dance) with the girls.

Diwali, the festival of lights, sweets, and fireworks was, as usual, one of the events looked forward to. Parents joined their children in the euphoric festive mood.

Folk dances were performed on the occasion of 'Gollu'. 'The Kolattam' and Garba, the high energy dances, were presented, resulting in a visual treat for one and all!

Students were our special guests on Children's Day and were treated to a day of fun and enrichment. The teachers had organized interesting play stations for them.

World Disability Day, on 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec. '08 was a runaway success! Many celebrities from music, dance, theatre, cinema etc. spent time with the youngsters who rarely get a chance to have a social evening.

The spirit of Christmas stood around the school like an enchanted spell. The whole school was a buzz with carols and presents and music and celebration. Charged, children and teachers created models and pictures of Santa and decorated the classes. Twenty-five special children from our organization participated in the Sports Day held by the government and gained valuable exposure. V-Excel contributed to the event by arranging 1000 food packets for children across various special schools in Chennai.

Sports day depicted by different 'Seasons' dawned on the 6th of February '09. It was a colourful, entertaining and innovative morning, and all the teachers and students deserved the resounding success that it turned out to be. The autumn drill, the umbrella song and the celebration of summer with the zipee day song captured the moods of nature well. Our Chief Guest for the function - Mr. G. Narayanan, Executive Director of Indian Overseas Bank and our Guest of Honour - Mr. Madhavan Sadgopan, Head of Cognizant Foundation were amazed at the children's abilities and enthusiasm! The movie Polar Express was screened in the school. All the viewers, teachers and children alike, watched it with great interest.

ATE Convocation, held in February '09 saw twenty-two trainees take a solemn oath to earnestly work for children with special needs. We are extremely happy that we are creating the most critical resource in this field, a team of dedicated educators.

## **Activities: Spreading awareness and equipping influencers in children's lives**

A masterpiece - 'Taare Zameen Par' - came about from the film's creator, Mr. Aamir Khan. We organized for all parents of our school children to view this realistic film - significantly raising social awareness about learning disabilities such as Dyslexia & emphasizing that parents and teachers must appreciate the uniqueness of each child. Orientation Programs focusing on Special Needs have been conducted for regular school teachers, volunteers, and parents.

A four day workshop was held in a well established school in Udupi (Karnataka), where two days were dedicated to training 150 teachers, and two days spent on

Personality Enhancement workshop for 250 students.

This year there was a demand for workshops on Relationship Management, Stress Management, Parenting, Mind activities for children etc. by the corporates such as Infosys, Cognizant, Steria, Google, and AIG Infotech. Dr. Vasudha and other resource professionals involved have evoked a lot of interest in these highly relevant sessions.

A week long workshop on principles of Anthroposophy and the educational philosophy of the famous psychologist, Rudolf Steiner. Ten professionals from our organization

attended this program. They shared the learnings with everyone involved in working with the children. Implementation was the next logical step and it still continues.

A workshop for awareness generation, organized by the Down Syndrome Association in Chennai and addressed by an expert team from UK, was attended by two of our teachers. They briefed the others about the new inputs gained and its applications.

The teachers have been getting on-going hands-on workshops on the techniques of massage. It is an initiating routine activity that helps children significantly as a calming technique and in increasing susceptibility to learning.

### **Supporters: Thanks to their backing, our efforts got a remarkable boost!**

As a social commitment, Sharan Inc. hosted a cultural event, with renowned singers and celebrities, wherein they applauded V-Excel's work in the area of developmental disabilities and extended part of the proceeds.

We were permitted to screen a premier show of the popular Tamil movie Dasavatham by Mr. Aascar Ravichandran, the film producer. Thanks to him and Mr. Kandaswamy, we were able to raise some funds on this count.

Preethi Ramaprasad, a young college graduate, presented a Bharatanatyam dance recital, "*Abhyasa - A Tribute to Learning*", at the George Street Playhouse, in New Brunswick, New Jersey as a fundraiser for us.

Sharada Krishnan, a small ten year old girl, found her joy in giving & sharing. ON her birthday, she raised \$ 550 and contributed this to the cause of special children.

Carnival supporters - Rotract Club of Vepery for food stalls and prizes, 20 volunteers from Dun & Bradstreet did compering, music, account handling, arrangements etc. and many enthusiastic students of Stella Maris College took charge of the stalls.

Hotel Savera helped host the social evening on the World Disability Day for special youngsters and organized snacks and drinks for over 100 people.

An educational trip to Dakshin Chitra (houses from different regions in South India have been set up) became more enjoyable, thanks to Fun Bus given by Ashok Leyland. They also initiated printing and purchase of 'desk calendars' from Vocational Unit.

'Fine Art' students from Stella Maris made 8 'Story Kits' for the school using different material and techniques and 27 M.Phil students from Madras University came for training and internship. We also had students from SIET College, Madras School of Social Work and MERF who came for observation, case studies and some volunteering. Britannia Industries Limited has been sponsoring nearly 3000 biscuits every quarter this year for our rural project, which helps motivate children and their parents to come and avail of the much needed special services for their holistic development.

Naidu Hall (a renowned retail chain in Chennai) gave 400 dresses for the young girls and boys that we work with in our rural project in Villipuram district.

Rotary Club of Kilpauk sponsored nine wheelchairs for special children in Villipuram. Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) brought joy to the rural children by distributing sweets and goodies to one and all during Diwali, the festival of lights.

## **Partners: Without them, we would never be able scale greater heights! THANKS.**

Wachovia Securities has proactively stepped forward to help us with staff honorarium. May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust (MSSC) Trust has been a valuable contributor for lending general operational support and helping us in capacity building. We have thus been able to establish new services and consolidate the current ones.

ASHA for Education have been our partners in sponsorship of some disadvantaged children with Autism, Mental Retardation and other developmental disabilities I-flex solutions extended support for our crucial teacher training program.

Chennai team at Dun and Bradstreet (D & B) extended their hand for documentation and system setting across various service units of V-Excel. The work is in progress.

We have embarked on a professional association with a Preventive Health Care Center, Doc Plus, which is a dedicated group actively involved in various health programs for

corporates. Together, we are catering to the needs of companies in areas of preventive health, stress management and the like.

### **Kaleidoscope Learning Center (KLC) :**

Three new teachers joined in, we welcomed 15 new children and added three classes to accommodate the changes in the number and composition of students.

This year's time table and structure of the school was based on the child-centric philosophy advocated by Anthroposophy. Parents' inputs, and an inter-departmental discussion were the basis of IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) for each child.

We worked on a 'block' teaching system. The classes were familiarized with physical India; teachers used eurhythmy, story telling, free play, and kitchen activity to teach these concepts. A bit of history in the form of short stories on 'civilizations' and some mythological stories were taught interestingly through craft, poetry, story, drama. 'Celebrations' was the next block as the festival season beckoned, starting with Vijay Dashami and Golu, and ending with X'Mas; the focus was on 'Reading'. The third block was 'Ecosystem'. The world of animals, plants, insects, was brought to the classes and field trips were made to observe and learn about different ecosystems. The children surprised us with their assimilation styles and the concepts that they have internalized. A unique concept was designed - a day for the mothers to come together, interact and keep their hands busy. The objective was to help them to work this way with their child. They did eurhythmy, passed bean bags, knitted, embroidered and clay work.

Teachers are the backbone of our organization and what could have been a better time to celebrate their valuable contribution than the Teacher's Day? All our teachers spent a gala day on the beach and it was a real treat to see them so free and relaxed!

Sports Day depicted by different 'Seasons' was colourful, entertaining and innovative and all the teachers and students deserved the resounding success that it turned out to be. The learnings from this program are invaluable and just impossible to quantify! The teachers have been receiving regular workshops on various important topics like diet, rhythm, massages etc. from experts and their implementation and result is visible through our children's progress.

## Bridges Learning Academy (BLA)

This year has heralded a host of changes, starting from physically shifting to the rooms upstairs to making it more child-friendly. Textbooks in all the subjects were changed to make learning an interesting, yet challenging experience. Brain Gym exercises and eurhythmic movements have been incorporated in assembly sessions. The new academic year has brought with it an increase in the number of students. They are enjoying their art and craft classes, and Occupational Therapy sessions. As a part of life skills program, they prepared a host of delicious items for the Tuck Shop.

We started Kolam (Rangoli) Therapy with our students that will enable the students to improve in eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, concentration and memory power, besides sequencing and planning, improving strokes in cursive writing & speed writing. Music classes have begun and children have been learning new songs and bhajans. They also have been learning about the different facets of art – pencil shading, coloring and painting – and are enjoying themselves thoroughly during these classes. Many field trips were made – Birla Planetarium Guindy National Park, the Adyar beach, a bakery unit, the aquarium, to name a few. These fascinated the students due to the dual experience they offered, excitement plus learning!

It gives us great pleasure to share with you that three of our students – Siddharth, Shyam and Meenu – will be joining regular schools in the forthcoming year. Our ultimate aim is to mainstream the children after a brief pull-out, and with these children moving out we are left with mixed feelings! We will surely miss them all, but our heartfelt blessings will always be with them.

## V-Excel Remedial Center (VRC)

Children who are in regular schools, and come to us only for periodic remedial training. The primary areas of focus are academics, life skills, and social skills. Children who receive understanding and support from their schools show a lot of promise while those deprived need longer time to make progress. We earnestly hope that school teachers realize their immense impact on the child, be aware of the child's problems and accept each child fully. We coordinated a Summer Camp '08 in which 23 children with developmental delays participated. Diverse development activities were conducted in the camp, including movement based on Eurythmy, knowing oneself and others, safety, science experiments, indoor and outdoor games, kitchen work, art and craft, music and dance, story time and wet-on-wet painting. The Camp concluded with an exhibition of children's learnings.

Nearly ten children with Autism in the school-readiness group have moved to the full time program at our special school (KLC) and new children have been admitted in their place.

Orientation sessions were held for the parents of children in group remedial as well as for those with one-on-one training. Introducing the new structure and inclusion of aspects of Anthroposophy during the remedial sessions formed the focus of the meetings. This included experiences of 'movement' or eurythmy for all.

In-service teacher training commenced this year with weekly workshops consisting of text study and child study. The insights that emerged during these meetings go a long way to guide the teachers to understand the children better and better.

'Movement' and 'foot massage' have become an integral part of the morning routine. Children look forward to this connection with their teachers and have shown us how they need to bond with one another before any learning can effectively happen.

Musical instruments such as Guitar, Gadamba, Cymbals, Keyboard, Mridangam and Xylophone were introduced and a music corner set up to explore their interest and talent. The exam months bring in high stress and increased anxiety for children and parents, resulting from preparation and writing of exams by children going to

inclusive schools. Our teachers' ably handle this and walk them through these stressful situations, and ease their pressure with intensified academic work, massage, wet-on-wet, and bean bag activities.

### **Academy for Teacher Excellence (ATE):**

We run a one year Diploma course in Special Education (Autism Spectrum Disorder), recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI - Central Government body, under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment). The students were examined under four practical papers - Individualized program plan, Group teaching, Therapeutics-A- Communication therapy and Occupational Therapy, and Therapeutics-B-Behavioral modification and Social skills development.

We conducted a comprehensive three month course on Learning Disabilities (such as Dyslexia) that included both theoretical and practical training.

The new academic year saw 14 enthusiastic and focused trainees enrolled for the course. They visited regular, special and inclusive schools in batches of 3-4 and submitted their observation reports on varying needs of regular and special children.

Use of computers as a communication medium with non-verbal children was demonstrated and tips to recognize subtle underlying points were given. Sessions on Legal Aspects, Communication (Listening) with the role plays, IEP, Lesson Plans, Interventions, teaching Math and Reading skills, etc. were stimulating and brought in many interesting doubts, questions and clarifications.

'Rain Man', 'Black' and 'Taare Zameen Par' were screened and the screenings were followed by lively debates on the role of a special educator, 'parents and siblings' issues and inclusion. It was interesting and enlightening to hear different viewpoints.

Learning process through practical sessions with children is the toughest part of the course and our students did remarkably well in this area. The course tested their resources and they gained insights about our own capacities. On the whole, the students felt it had enriched their understanding of special children and their needs.

### **Counseling and Assessment Unit (C & A)**

The New Year has begun with a lot of enthusiasm. The Counseling calendar, both in school and at the Vocational Center, was full. With the increased awareness, referrals for Play Therapy and Parent Counseling, our 'clients' have risen substantially.

Our experience with Play Therapy and Group Therapy has been excellent. The children have all shown advancement in skill levels. Interpersonal communication, expressions, rapport, social skills and manners, have changed for the better, resulting in more synergistic group functioning. We intend to extend the play therapy service, professional support in the areas of behaviour modification, counseling, formal testing and assessments to regular schools.

We helped the parents of adolescent children from our Vocational Center start a Parent Support Group. This group has been very eager and active; it will eventually become a self-help group. The idea is that parents themselves share their experiences in periodic meetings and help each other about effectively dealing with their children. Recently, Dr. John Miller, Head of our Occupational Therapy Unit, addressed the group on Biomedicine and Nutrition which was very well-received by the parents.

We ensured that children from our learning disabilities school shared their issues, concerns, achievements, and triumphs with their classmates. The aim was to enhance their learning, gaining positive energy and taking pride in their accomplishments.

We developed a concrete program to impart certain specific life skills required for

interpersonal communication in the Vocational unit. The Counselors deployed drama and mock scenarios as techniques to impart the required skills. Children and their groups have been seen to enjoy their weekly sessions of such training. Association with outside agencies has increased referrals to our private clinic as well.

## Vocational Training Unit (VTU)

We strengthened our team with an experienced coordinator and two Special Educators. With the volunteers, we had an excellent team, teaching them academics, Activities for Daily Living (ADL's) and practical living skills for earning opportunities. Vocational trainees underwent a 'kitchen program' as a part of developing practical living skills. With the help of a trainer, they were trained to cook their own functional lunch; they also ate it so that they could taste their preparations and learn from it. The tailoring unit is also now operational. The trainees are learning to sew using the tailoring machine; initially they learnt stitching straight lines on cloth. The trainees organized a mock birthday party; the goal was to develop independent organizing skills. The students were teamed up into invitation team, food team, decoration team etc., under the guidance of trainers. It was an excellent job done! This year, Mrs. Prema Gnanavoli, an experienced and talented vocational trainer, trained the students and the staff to work as a team in a structured, disciplined fashion in a simulated formal work environment for a week every month. This involved a lot of awareness of micro-details, which are so important if our students have to fit into the world outside. Many behavioral problems (shouting, impatience, turn-taking etc.) have diminished and the students are becoming more focused and responsible in their work. Six months down, and our children have learnt to make some beautiful products in the form of calendars, stoles, writing pads and many other gift items. It is very evident that they have benefitted from the clearly set out structure, discipline and method of teaching. The added plus is the sense of pride our students experience, especially when they create something beautiful on their own. We put up a stall at an exhibition organized by Lion's Club. It was an opportunity to showcase the abilities of our children and also generate higher awareness for V-Excel. It was exciting to see people eager to buy the items even before they were finished!

We find parents living in denial and having high expectations, especially in academics. Especially for adolescents with special needs, we urge parents to see what the child can do and focus on these abilities for their future rather than fret over the disabilities.

## Early Intervention (EI)

We had a new set up for Early Intervention for children between 0-6 years having developmental lags. Fortunately, we have been able to invest in good equipment and therapists, and it has helped us establish this unit. 42 children in our care have been thoroughly assessed in various areas such as - Neuromuscular development (Gross and fine motor skills), Cognitive development, Sensory processing development, Speech and language development, Behaviour and regulatory development, Social development, Functional development/independence in self help skills.

Based on the sensory profile & sensory diet of the child, appropriate intervention was given. The aim of the program was to: (a) Promote learning to facilitate development.

(b) Independence in activities of daily living. (c) Inclusion in school and in society.

We offered Parent Training and Home Program. Parents were told the importance of training functional independence skills in toileting, eating (biting, chewing and

swallowing), and brushing. Task-analysis was done and parents were taught specific skills to train the child at home, keeping in mind his/her lags. The attempt has been to work towards a partnership between parents and the therapist. We try to see that care and love are the foundation and that the child does not become helpless and passive. Annual evaluation has been carried out. For the children between the age 6 months to one year, an intense home facilitation program by the mother, with a follow-up and review every month has been launched. The mother is trained on various aspect of facilitation and this mode has been received very well with the parents. The program includes various aspects of facilitation like motor skills, feeding techniques, and language stimulation. The following months will see children getting admitted to various play and primary schools.

We wish to also focus on awareness generation for parents and doctors, and plan to intensify our work in the area of sensory development as well as remedial work with these young children. We will now need to strengthen all our resources.

### **Rural Outreach - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA):**

From this year we have increased the number of Special Educators working under the Government Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Scheme from 22 to 32. This includes the new teachers for the 10 day-care centers in 10 blocks of Villipuram district of TN, India. Over 1500 children are catered to in these resource rooms.

Our team of rural special educators undertook an elaborate exercise of identification of children with special needs through house-to-house visits. They detailed the resulting benefits of intervention to their parents (many of whom were illiterate) and we are happy that we could give personal care and attention to these disadvantaged children. We conducted a medical assessment camp in all the 10 blocks. Each block took us a day where nearly 300 children underwent examination. The required appliances were distributed over two rounds. This includes disbursement of 41 wheelchairs, 81 calipers, 76 special boots, 26 gaiters, 6 stretchers, 10 splints, 10 tricycles, 2 knee cage, 129 hearing aids, and 233 spectacles. Honourable Minister for Education, Thiru. Ponmudi, distributed these appliances to the children.

Our Special Educators acted in the 'Awareness Program Drama' which became very popular in the villages. Parents emphasized their child's improvement in walking and speaking, and thanked the special educators for their deep involvement in the service. The government took up an initiative of Training the Trainer on educating children with different disabilities, including physical and mental challenges. One of our rural Special Educators was identified for the purpose and he has now ensured training to all our Special Educators there. The benefit of training further cascades to the regular school teachers in over 660 government schools we work with. These schools promote inclusion and hence this training is extremely useful for education of special children. As regards the home based programs, we train the parents and the neighbourhood community for supporting and rehabilitating the children with special needs.