

## Mother Mary's Special School Annual Report 2016



When Rachel Vinitha Rani (*centre photo with JHC Trustee*) first opened her special school for youngsters with Intellectual Disability (*referred to in India as mentally retarded children*) in 2003, she aimed high, with a total of 75, many collected daily with her own school minibus. The need was acute but several factors caused a rethink. She couldn't get enough teachers, or cope with the expenses and the minibus had to go. It was a tough lesson to learn but she can smile about it now. One of the founding girls was carried in by her father; she's still here, solemnly concentrating on her writing, making progress and a tribute to the Founder's vision and tenacity.

Total roll today is 38 (25 boys and 13 girls), of whom 22 live in the adjoining hostel with the balance attending daily and arriving by auto-rickshaw or motorcycle pillion from up to 20 kms away. 6 of the day students are regular but the remainder fluctuate, usually due to sickness. The live in youngsters are almost equally divided – 12 girls and 10 boys. Most youngsters have a functioning family and return to them for periodic leaves; only two are orphans. As recently as 2 years ago the age range was nominally 6 to 16, but because there's no set syllabus or timing and each youngsters programme is according to their individual needs and progress, there's no upper cut off. The job is done in most cases when the youngster is sufficiently educated and then trained, to return home and hold down a simple, paid job. So now the nominal upper age limit is 20 or thereabouts, with the majority achieving simple paid employment; only a very few will never go solo.

Currently eight staff run the school and hostel:

- Principal (and Founder) – herself a Special Needs Teacher
- Special Needs Teacher
- Physiotherapists – 2, (one male, one female)
- Vocational Teacher
- Teaching Assistant
- Warden
- Carer



The post of Cook is vacant and with the new school year a Driver will be added. Meanwhile the Warden and Carer, who largely work in the residential hostel, help out in the day school, with Warden as Relief Cook. Government pays for three staff only – 2 Special Needs Teachers and one Physiotherapist, each Rs 10,000 monthly; it also provides food for 15 residential children. A minimum roll of 25 is required to maintain the school's status but there's no shortage of potential students and capacity for up to 50 with current infrastructure, albeit with no room to expand.

The concerned government authority is The Commissioner of the Differently Aabled, who reports to the Social Welfare Board, alongside but not subject to either the Child Welfare Committee or the District Child Protection Unit. These last are actively concerned with normal residential schemes and even HIV related schemes (eg. BTS and DACS), but seemingly are not involved with mental health. All cases (of Intellectual Disability) are known by government, registered and are given a special identity card to be worn on a cord round the neck. Youngsters parents are paid between Rs 1,000 and 1,500 monthly towards their upkeep. Some parents pass on between

Rs 200 and 1,000 monthly to MMSS voluntarily; any attempt to impose a fee could result in youngsters being withdrawn and cut off from help.

Paradoxically while many children with intellectual disability are hidden away or locked up at home, parents are in denial and go to extraordinary lengths to seek 'cures,' often incurring debt. While Government hospitals have psychiatric units to deal with such cases without charge, parents generally mistrust them and pay for help from private hospitals, or alternative, sometimes dodgy practitioners (literally of the 'snake oil' variety.) While denying their child has any problem yet seeking the cure that will open the door to normal education, time is passing and with aging, rehabilitation becomes more difficult. Six is the ideal age to start special needs teaching but persuading parents to release their child then is difficult; they want to hang on in hope of doing it their way. Older children are more set in their (faulted) way of life and it takes time even to get their attention, let alone achieve progress. Younger children hopefully haven't yet 'switched off' or shut themselves away from contact or influence.

The new school year starts early June and for the first two months the staff are busy assessing their new intake (hopefully nearer age 6). Two established systems are used by the trained Special Needs Teachers:

Behavioural Assessment System for Indian Children (BASIC) and Madras Developmental Programming System (MDPS Scales).

From the results of these assessments, each child is placed in their appropriate group and, individual goals and teaching plans are drawn up. Assessments are repeated every three-months. It's very time consuming but gets results; this isn't about palliative care at a sort of hospice or respite centre, it's about education and training at a school, which most children will move through to return to mainstream living. Those who can't will still find a safe-haven here and efforts to help them will continue. Parents are briefed regularly, to ensure their cooperation and awareness.

Principal explains the four categories of disability she observes to draw up her groups or 'classes,' with the numbers ( ) in each:

- (1) Profound - IQ below 28 and needing 1:1 support.
- (8) Severe Custodial - must be watched constantly and needing 1:4 support.
- (9) Moderate - Educable, needing 1:8 support.
- (20) Mild - Trainable and needing 1:10 support.

The profound boy will change little and go nowhere but can adopt (and keep) improvements in personal behaviour. The good news for the other groups is 'no condition is permanent'; with time some of the 8 severe can become educable and more certainly the 9 educable will become trainable, many to the point they can return home and hold down a simple job.



All along they have received training to modify behaviour and develop skills but at some point the focus switches to vocational training. In-house the girls learn and practice skills like making garlands, baskets, ear rings, necklace ornaments and candles. Boys are prepared for work by understanding and using tools in the classroom, then moving to an outside motor-cycle workshop to work under supervision. Kumar is now in the ADL stage (Active Daily Living), has been back with his family, with a job in a motor-cycle workshop, riding one himself and helping his family both with income and a pillion taxi service! Two more boys are currently going through the same process. A girl works in a supermarket, cleaning, helping customers, filling shelves etc and earning Rs 4,000 monthly (more than many rural adults earn in casual labouring). A pattern emerges. Principal Rani hopes to alternate boys and girls training year by year for about five children each year. Thus the boys' workshop training year will be followed by something for the girls – maybe bakery training. The girls' costume jewellery is impressively well designed and made but MMSS hasn't a shop; maybe they could sell them at an open house or awareness event.

Two children have no parents; they'll continue to live here and play their part either working outside or helping within. Deva is a small, mild boy with roots in northern India. His parents abandoned him in a local railway station but this has been his home for six years; he acts outside of classes as security guard, opening the gates and greeting visitors.

Principal has details of some 3,000 registered cases of Intellectual Disability in the Dindigul District. Prevalence is said to owe more to marriage within the family than brain stunting arising from malnutrition or problems at birth. Her task is to identify about 100 in her urban area and select 15 possibles aged about 6 for a new intake. Then she and her other Special Needs Teacher will commence field work during April/May (while the school takes a short annual leave), seeking them out and counselling parents. It's a mark of the progress made that many children can go home on leave. Before coming to MMSS they would have been prone to roaming wild (if not shut away) and to antisocial behaviour, like helping themselves from a stall or damaging property. With their behaviour modified in the special school, they now go home, are well behaved and don't wander off or get into mischief. On return they might have lapsed slightly and so take a week to settle in and 'conform' once again' but it's worth it – they've maintained a strong bond with their family and the break has stimulated their awareness.

While Principal tirelessly and with great good humour pursues Plan A, she always has Plan B lurking, or constantly being amended as needs and circumstances change. In June she desperately needs to find and afford a driver and get her little minibus back on the road, especially if more 'Mild' category children are to have on-the-job training. The residential quarters are very basic with restricted 'bathroom' space but she longs to upgrade. Building a covered dining area, doubling as recreation space, had commenced but halted, with the back (boundary) wall now in place. She's been thinking outside the box and now leans more towards keeping this donated site, (rent-free with utilities paid) purely for a day school and moving the residential project, with its own new school, to a new site. Beyond it probably being in this area for convenience (no point in being somewhere more open, as the town will soon move out to meet it, she quips) she hasn't decided where, but it's certainly at the front of her mind. Boys and girls would have separate bathrooms and another level of accommodation would take older children in vocational training. Ultimately she might have to consider mature ex-students able to generate income but with nowhere to live. Hopefully the authorities would treat this as a separate unit qualifying for assistance in its own right.

Visiting Mother Mary's Special School and hearing its Founder tell her inspiring story, gives the needs and future of this group of vulnerable children an entirely new perspective. It's a long way from preconceptions of a happy haven for hopeless cases. It certainly is a happy haven and for a few children will always be just that. For the greater majority however, it's their chance to overcome their disability to the point they can return to mainstream life as a contributing (and respected) member of their family. This isn't just an optimistic hope; it's an achievable target for the majority. Equally the amazing Rachel Vinitha Rani has already validated her design and process..... and is making it happen.



As vulnerability through sheer poverty lessens and residential schemes become starved of admissions (and burdened with bureaucracy) new definitions of 'vulnerable children' are sought. These should include needs where society and government don't already have all the answers and would welcome help. JHC is familiar with HIV related work; overcoming Intellectual Disability is another mission which 'helps children to change their lives.' To many it doesn't have the endearing images to which we have become accustomed, but maybe the appeal to conscience would still be strong and irresistible.

Learn more at: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1Su\\_9-Sd\\_Z1U0tVRGpsanRFR1k/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1Su_9-Sd_Z1U0tVRGpsanRFR1k/view?usp=sharing)

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