

October 2007

Dear Friends,

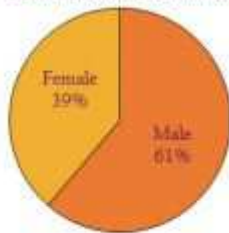
This has certainly been an eventful 1st term. I have nothing but good news to share with you!

I just can't wait to tell you that our school has now been officially recognized by the state government; we are now affiliated with the Uttar Pradesh (the name of our state) Board of Education. This is very, very good news. Parents can now feel confident that they are sending their children to a "real" school and that their children's grades will mean something if they ever have to transfer to another school. We are currently accredited through 5th grade; we will have to reapply later to receive accreditation at higher levels. But for now, this is sufficient for us. I wish you all could have been here to celebrate the good news.

In order to get the accreditation, we had to pass inspection. The inspectors who came to the school were surprised. They said they hadn't seen a school like ours before with so much happy learning taking place. They were impressed by the lesson plans the teachers showed them; in many schools here, lesson plans are non-existent. (Actually in many "schools" here teachers and sometimes even students are non-existent.)

We also had to submit several documents including some statistics regarding male to female ratio among our students as well as student population breakdown by caste. I had actually never asked the caste of my students since it is of little importance to me. The main criteria for admission into the school are poverty and having illiterate parents, regardless of caste. But, since we had to submit these figures to the board, I now have the numbers.

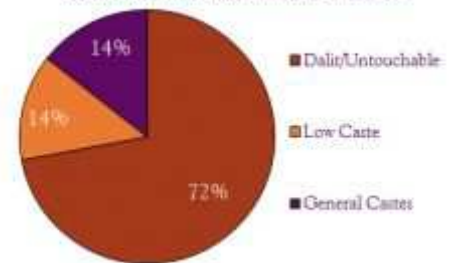
Percentage of Males to Females in Total Student Population



You might be interested to know that we have 60% male students and 40% female students. This is quite a good ratio since the parents in this community often cannot afford to educate all their children. It is common for them to find employment for their daughters so that they can afford to send at least one son to school. It pleases me that, given the option of affordable education, parents are sending both their sons and daughters to school.

As far as caste, the large majority (72%) of our students are from the *dalit* or untouchable community. These people are so low on the social ladder that they are not even within the caste system; they have no caste. Their role in society has traditionally been limited to the most demeaning jobs: house cleaning, street sweeping, toilet cleaning, garbage disposal, disposing of dead bodies, etc. Nowadays, several of the men in the community are cycle rickshaw drivers. Besides the students from the very lowest of the social strata, another 24% are low caste (also known as scheduled caste, these people qualify for special government upliftment programs) and the remaining 4% are from the general, or upper, castes.

Total Student Population by Caste



Moving on to other good news, I have accepted the offer of a young British woman to help teach English in the school. She just arrived in Varanasi in order to study Hindi and will be staying at least through March. She offered to teach in the school five mornings per week! So I have charged her with the task of teaching our three lowest level classes. This will free me up to give better English instruction to our older students. Previously I was trying to teach all the children but was able to come to class only every other day. It was a fair solution, (class teachers filled in on the days I couldn't come), but this will be much better.

Also, I will soon have the badly needed help of an administrative assistant. So far I have been trying to administrate the school all on my own (on top of teaching English). This included everything: keeping admission and attendance records, gathering teaching materials, developing worksheets (the other day I saw that in three years time I have created over 3,600 documents for the school!!), choosing textbooks, training teachers, preparing exams and report cards, organizing volunteers, creating school policy, keeping library records, etc., etc., and trying to be patient and love everybody in the process! To say I have been overwhelmed would be an understatement. Rosie, a Swiss woman (and friend) will be arriving within a month to help lessen the burden. She, like me, is a bit of a perfectionist, knows how to use a computer, and cares about the children. I have a list waiting for her!

In more bits of good news: our 1st grade teacher had a baby boy on September 6th! Mother and child are fine. Our second grade teacher is pregnant and due to deliver in November. This has meant a bit more cost for me because I have had to pay for a substitute, but I was happy to be able to give the substitute work – she comes from the same community as the majority of my students and her mother, a widow, can certainly use help in supporting the family.

Our student numbers have remained steady at around 110. Make that 111. Just yesterday a mother came and asked if her eldest son could join his younger siblings in coming to the school. “I don’t know why,” she said, “but all the kids [in the community] want to come to your school. My younger boy used to complain every day about going to school, but now he gets up and gets ready all on his own.” Those are the comments I like to hear.

A special thank you for your prayers and financial gifts. Without you, none of this would be happening. Thank you so much.

love,
Connie