INTERIM REPORT & UPDATES

Conversations with Trees
Reporting period: April–September 2026
Pilot site: Vidyashilp Academy, Bengaluru

a. Project Summary

Conversations with Trees is an eighteen-month research and engagement initiative that brings together plant science, acoustic ecology, participatory theatre and creative practice to foster localised environmental stewardship. By treating urban trees as living educational infrastructure, the project invites students and communities to become active observers, citizen scientists and storytellers within their immediate ecosystems.

The project is built around sustained encounters with trees. Scientific observation is paired with theatre, writing, sound and visual art so that students encounter the same trees through different ways of seeing, listening, questioning and making. The intention is to build familiarity over time, allowing observation to inform reflection and reflection to shape further observation. This iterative cycle of observation, reflection, action and refined understanding is central to the project's methodology.

The June–September period focused on establishing this approach through a pilot engagement at Vidyashilp Academy (VSA). The monsoon period provided an opportunity to observe seasonal change while developing the creative and ecological practices that will eventually feed into the audio-theatre work.

b. Objectives (from proposal)

The project aims to:

- Bridge the gap between theoretical climate concepts and real-world application through place-based experiential learning in four schools or communities.
- Integrate Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics into outdoor environmental education.
- Invite students into sustained and repeated encounters with trees through observation, play, listening and creative response.
- Explore seasonal observation of leaves, flowers and fruits through phenology and SeasonWatch.
- Demonstrate how creative practice and audio theatre can connect ecological observation with lived experience and storytelling.

c. Activities undertaken during the reporting period

During the reporting period, a six-month pilot was initiated **at Vidyashilp Academy** across June–September 2026. The team facilitated weekly sessions that approached observation through five interconnected strands:

Observing seasonal change through SeasonWatch

The project began building the practice of observing trees across the monsoon season through phenological observation. SeasonWatch provided a framework for noticing changes in leaves, flowers and fruits and for returning to the same trees over time.

At this stage, the purpose was not to draw conclusions from a short period of data, but to build familiarity with seasonal rhythms and develop the habit of returning, noticing and documenting change. This was consistent with the project's seasonal design for the monsoon period, which focused on observation, return and documentation during Bengaluru's transition into and through the monsoon.

Observing trees through walks and botanical inquiry

Arun's sessions brought students into direct contact with trees on the VSA campus. Students compared leaf structures, bark textures and physical characteristics; observed colour released from teak leaves; experimented with the seed pods of Ruellia tuberosa; explored plants through smell and taste where appropriate; and learnt the names and characteristics of different species.

In August, students returned to the campus trees through a more detailed tree walk. Seven species were explored through their histories, origins, functions and distinctive features. Students showed interest in learning both common and scientific names and began considering why particular species were present on campus and how they related to the wider history of Bengaluru's landscape. The route and observations were documented for subsequent mapping, visual and script-making activities.

Theatre and writing as ways of observing relationships and ecosystems

The theatre and writing sessions used imagination and reflection as ways of entering ecological questions. Students created fictional characters and explored the coexistence of different qualities within the same person. This became a bridge into questions about trees, invasive species and non-native plants.

Rather than categorising trees as simply "good" or "bad", students were encouraged to ask where a species came from, why it was planted and what relationships it had with the ecosystem around it. The discussion expanded into Bengaluru's ecological history, including relationships between tree cover,

grasslands, urbanisation and human intervention. Students considered how different ecosystems support different communities of insects, birds and mammals, and how a tree cannot always be understood separately from the landscape in which it exists.

This established a connection between writing and ecological observation. Character development became a way of exploring relationships and systems, while personal reflection provided a pathway into ecological questions.

Hands-on art and visual observation

The visual-art sessions provided another way for students to slow down and observe particular trees. Following Arun's tree walk, students returned to the same trail and were assigned individual trees. A planned cyanotype activity had to be adapted because of rain. The session became a nature-journalling exercise in which students observed their trees, collected natural elements and created postcards through writing, drawing and monoprinting.

Students also explored mark-making, cyanotype and roller-based monoprinting using leaves, flowers, found natural materials and recycled handmade paper. Monsoon cloud cover and moisture affected some cyanotype prints, turning weather into part of the learning process. Partial or faint prints became opportunities to discuss experimentation, uncertainty, material conditions and reuse.

The continuation from one session into another was significant. Students brought questions about trees encountered during earlier walks into the art sessions, allowing observation to accumulate rather than remain a one-time encounter.

Learning through return and documentation

An important development during this period was the creation of trackable student work connected to observation. Students were able to see how their understanding of particular trees developed through notes, writing, drawings, maps, prints, postcards and other responses.

This created a visible record of learning for students, teachers and facilitators. The work is not only documentation of individual sessions, but an emerging archive that allows students to return to earlier observations and notice how their questions and responses have changed. This supports the central intention of the project: learning through attention, return and relationship rather than through one-off environmental activities.

Outreach with school teachers and public/community networks

Alongside the VSA pilot, the team continued outreach to schools, teachers and community networks. Meetings and conversations have been held with Mallya Aditi International School, Poorna Learning Centre and RBANMS. Mallya Aditi International School and Poorna have indicated that a possible

engagement could be explored during the next academic year, with a proposed January–March window. Conversations with RBANMS remain ongoing.

The team is also exploring outreach beyond school networks through BLR Hubba, Bengaluru Creative Circus, SGB, parent–child networks and other public or community platforms. Existing networks including Nature Classrooms, Parikrma schools and the Climate Educators Network remain relevant pathways for building wider partnerships.

d. Milestones achieved

- Established a working pedagogical flow at VSA that blends phenological observation, botanical inquiry, theatre, writing, sound and visual art.
- Introduced students to repeated observation of particular campus trees through walks, tree selection, seasonal questions and return visits.
- Integrated tactile arts and printmaking, moving students from perceiving trees as background to recognising them as dynamic ecological characters and micro-habitats.
- Created an emerging archive of field notes, tree profiles, maps, sound observations, mark-making, prints, postcards and narrative material.
- Tested the curriculum in a real school setting and used facilitator observations to refine pacing, group structures, material preparation and reflection prompts.
- Established an initial school and volunteer base, with teachers engaged at VSA and active facilitators/volunteers supporting implementation.

e. Challenges, learning and work not undertaken

The proposal originally envisioned engagement with four schools.
Establishing school partnerships within the proposed period has been challenging because of school calendars, administrative processes and institutional changes.
The VSA pilot therefore became the primary site for testing and documenting the curriculum.

Workstream	Proposal Commitment	Progress to Date	Current Status / Gap	Remaining Work & Timeline
Foundation partnerships and coordination	Phase 1, Feb–Apr 2026: Core-team coordination and personalised outreach to four schools	Core planning, execution reports, synthesis documents, school outreach, and teacher engagement have been documented. Teacher meetings took place at NCBS on 22 March and in Malleswaram on 22 April; CwT also participated in Bhoomi Habba in June.	**Partially complete.** Initial relationships exist, but school engagement needs a renewed calendar and named points of contact after Diwali.	Review all school contacts and meeting history by September; prepare school-specific follow-up notes in October; restart meetings after Diwali, November–December 2026.

Workstream	Proposal Commitment	Progress to Date	Current Status / Gap	Remaining Work & Timeline
Teacher recruitment	Phase 1, Feb–Apr 2026: Recruit 8–12 champion teachers through informal, co-design-led outreach	Teachers have been recruited at VSA, and early school meetings, walks, and discussions have taken place.	**In progress.** The number of consistently participating teachers is below the intended 8–12 champion-teacher cohort.	Confirm VSA teacher participation retrospectively; identify teacher leads at MAIS, Poorna and other partner schools; establish teacher continuity arrangements in Phase 3–4, September 2026–February 2027.
Community volunteer mobilisation	Phase 1, Feb–Apr 2026: Public EoI, volunteer meet-up, role stations, facilitator WhatsApp group, and 50+ registered volunteers	A volunteer group has been formed. Vaishali, Harshita and Athiq have been active contributors.	**Early-stage / under target.** The active group is small and needs role clarity, training and recruitment.	Conduct a focused second volunteer call; define roles across facilitation, documentation, sound, ecology and logistics; onboard at least 8–12 active volunteers by November 2026 and expand further through February 2027.
Phenology training	Phase 1, Feb–Apr 2026: Full-day phenology training led by a SeasonWatch expert coordinator	Tree lists, seasonal explanations and early observation practices are in place at VSA. Students have begun returning to selected trees.	**Ongoing.** Training and observation have begun, but sustained training across schools and community cohorts remains limited.	Run a structured SeasonWatch/phenology orientation for teachers and volunteers; establish simple observation protocols and shared logs; September–November 2026.
Curriculum co-design	Phase 1, Mar–Apr 2026: Two-day retreat; 12-month framework; 8–12 protagonist trees; shared phenological calendar; teacher commitment	Curriculum development is progressing through school conversations and session planning at VSA; discussions are active with VSA, MAIS and Poorna.	**In progress.** The formal cross-school retreat and shared curriculum framework have not yet been completed.	Use the Diwali break for a co-design retreat or two shorter workshops; agree on priority trees, observation calendar, school roles and common documentation formats by November 2026.

Workstream	Proposal Commitment	Progress to Date	Current Status / Gap	Remaining Work & Timeline
School-based workshops	Phase 2, May–Aug 2026: Monthly workshops combining observation, storymaking, audio documentation, reflection and return	Multiple workshops have been documented at VSA from June to September, covering tree observation, mapping, mark-making, seasonal change, printmaking, journalling and imaginative writing. RBANMS and MAIS have also been approached.	**Strong at VSA; partial elsewhere.** VSA is the active pilot site, while additional schools need confirmed workshop schedules.	Continue VSA sessions monthly; finalise at least one additional school engagement from September onward; target a stable two-school model by December 2026.
Student engagement target	Phases 2–4: Invite 80+ students into sustained encounters with trees	Approximately 25 students are participating at VSA.	**In progress.** Current engagement is meaningful but remains below the 80+ cumulative target.	Confirm VSA participant count and attendance; broaden to new classes or schools; aim for 50+ sustained students by December 2026 and 80+ by February 2027.
SeasonWatch / phenological observations	Phases 2–4: Document 200+ observations, prioritising repeated observation over short-term trend analysis	Seasonal observation has started; students have returned to selected trees and begun noticing leaves, flowers, fruits, insects, weather and associated life.	**In progress.** The practice exists, but the observation count, regularity and shared data format need consolidation.	Create a common log, assign repeat trees and observation days, and review numbers monthly; September 2026–February 2027.
Community phenology training	Phases 1–4: Train 40+ community members in sustained phenology-based observation	Three teachers at VSA have been identified as part of the emerging trained cohort.	**Under target.** A wider community cohort has not yet been established.	Include teachers, parents, volunteers, school staff and neighbourhood participants in two training cycles; target 15–20 trained participants by December 2026 and 40+ by February 2027.
Audio narrative development	Phase 2 onward: Build an archive of observations, sounds, reflections and	Material has been generated through soundscape work, writing, tree characters, maps, observations, printmaking and postcards.	**Strong archive; needs editorial transition.** There is substantial raw material but it needs curation	Select 2–4 protagonist trees and associated student material; begin interviews, monologues, sound logging and script development;

Workstream	Proposal Commitment	Progress to Date	Current Status / Gap	Remaining Work & Timeline
	emerging narrative threads		into coherent narrative pathways.	September–November 2026.
First two audio pieces	Phase 3, Sep–Nov 2026: Develop and professionally produce two audio pieces and hold school-based listening gatherings	One piece is beginning to emerge through existing sessions and materials.	**Planned / upcoming.** Production workflow, editorial responsibility and listening-event dates need confirmation.	Select two pieces by late September; draft and workshop scripts in October; record/edit in October–November; hold school-based listening gatherings by late November 2026.

Challenges within the VSA engagement

- Time allotted by the school was sometimes limited, affecting outdoor exploration, discussion and reflection.
- Students accustomed to highly individualised academic settings sometimes found unstructured collaborative mapping and group tasks difficult.
- In a top-tier school context, initial explorations of seasonality showed that students often understood seasons through globalised food culture rather than local biological indicators.
- Heavy monsoon cloud cover created logistical challenges for UV-dependent cyanotype work, requiring adaptation into nature journalling, postcards and monoprinting.
- Sustained observation, collaborative planning, silence and open-ended reflection required additional scaffolding.
- Some planned reflection conversations on technique, morphology, shared learning and what students had learnt from one another could not be completed within the available session time.

Strategic partnership challenge

Relying solely on the Expression of Interest process has not produced the desired diversity of school partnerships, particularly among government and aided schools. The outreach strategy is therefore being revised to include direct institutional approaches, existing education networks, parent–child networks and public/community platforms.

f. Upcoming plans

The next phase will build on the observations and material already generated rather than introduce a disconnected set of activities.

- Continue the VSA engagement through observation, return visits, SeasonWatch recording, scripting and audio documentation.
- Begin moving from observation and material collection into tree narratives, monologues and sound recording.
- Use accumulated maps, prints, postcards, field notes and questions as source material for audio-theatre development.
- Continue outreach to Mallya Aditi International School and Poorna for a possible January–March 2027 engagement.
- Continue conversations with RBANMS and explore partnerships with government and aided schools.
- Expand outreach beyond school networks through BLR Hubba, Bengaluru Creative Circus, SGB, parent–child networks, Nature Classrooms, Parikrma schools and the Climate Educators Network.
- Use public programmes such as BLR Hubba and Bhoomi Habba-related networks to build visibility and community participation.

g. Course correction

Based on field observations, upcoming curriculum modules are being adjusted to include clearly defined roles for group work, such as mapping lead, material collector, acoustic listener, scribe and presenter. These roles are intended to scaffold collaboration and make group participation more equitable.

Facilitators are also adjusting session plans to validate students' contemporary cultural associations while gradually redirecting attention towards localised phenology, seasonal foods, campus ecology and Bengaluru's ecological history.

Weather-responsive planning has become part of the method. Cyanotype sessions will include exposure and drying contingencies, while rain can be used as an opportunity for journalling, postcard writing, monoprinting and reflective observation.

The curriculum is being treated as iterative rather than fixed. Session reports, student work and facilitator observations will continue to inform subsequent planning.

h. Images and documentation

Images, student work, field notes, maps, prints, postcards and session documentation will be maintained in a separate project drive folder and organised by school, date, session and activity. Where student photographs, audio or identifiable work are used for public dissemination, relevant school permissions and consent procedures will be followed.

What was attempted: June–September 2026

Over the reporting period, Conversations with Trees piloted its place-based STEAM curriculum with VSA students in Grades 7–11. Rather than relying on traditional indoor lectures, the programme used the school campus as a living laboratory for environmental learning.

Key interventions included:

- Sensory and spatial grounding through campus walks, adopted trees, mapping exercises and repeated observation.
- Acoustic attention through sound-listening activities that distinguished living sounds from mechanical and human-generated sound.
- Scientific and artistic synthesis through phenology, botanical inquiry, bark rubbing, mark-making, cyanotype, monoprinting, journalling and postcards.
- Theatre and writing as tools for exploring character, complexity, invasive species, non-native plants and ecological relationships.
- Localising climate concerns by connecting seasonal change, heat, weather and campus canopy to students' daily experience.
- Building an archive of student observations and creative responses for later scripting and audio-theatre production.

Risk	Why It Matters	Immediate Response
VSA becomes the only active school site	Limits the four-school ambition and student/community targets	Secure at least one additional school schedule before November
Teacher participation remains informal	Makes continuity dependent on external facilitators	Nominate one lead teacher and one support teacher per school
Volunteer cohort remains small	Limits facilitation capacity, documentation and future scale	Recruit in focused roles rather than through a broad generic call
Phenology observation is irregular	Makes it difficult to reach 200+ observations or establish meaningful return	Fix repeat trees, dates, logs and a simple observation protocol
Archive remains dispersed	Student writing, recordings and visual work may not become audio outputs	Assign an editorial lead and a shared archive structure in September
Audio production starts too late	Threatens the Sep–Nov deadline for the first two pieces	Lock the two narrative choices and production workflow immediately

Where this must go next: curricular trajectory

- Structured collaboration for audio walks: introduce clear group roles as students storyboard, script and edit tree monologues and geo-mapped audio walks.
- Formalise SeasonWatch data: embed standardised phenology protocols into recurring routines for adopted trees.
- Translate art into narrative: use prints, textures, maps and postcards as direct visual and conceptual anchors for character sketches and scripts.
- Deepen relationships and interdependence: explore fruiting, seed dispersal, fauna interactions, decomposition and the different communities supported by trees.
- Expand partnership diversity: move beyond school networks and reach government and aided schools, BLR Hubba, Bengaluru Creative Circus, SGB, parent–child networks and other community platforms.
- Prepare the next academic cycle: develop January–March proposals for Mallya Aditi International School and Poorna while continuing RBANMS discussions

School partnerships and course-correction

Following conversations with BSF, the team has moved towards a more proactive approach to school outreach, particularly to increase the diversity of school partnerships.

Additional schools have now been approached and a few have expressed interest and are being lined up for meetings.
The team will continuing conversations through existing networks including Nature Classrooms, Parikrma schools and the Climate Educators Network.

The VSA engagement has been useful in this process. Having 4 months of implementation, student work and documented learning has made it possible to share a more concrete understanding of the programme with prospective school partners, rather than approaching schools only with a proposed curriculum.

This remains an active area of work. The intention is to continue expanding the school partnerships while ensuring that the programme can respond to the calendars, structures and contexts of individual

The next phase will build on the observations and material already generated rather than introducing a new set of disconnected activities.

At VSA, the upcoming sessions will begin moving from observation and material collection into **scripting and recording**. Students will begin working with the observations, stories, visual material, maps and questions they have accumulated to develop narratives connected to their adopted trees. These narratives will then begin to be recorded as part of the audio theatre process.

The next phase will also deepen attention to relationships and interdependence, including fruiting, seed dispersal, fauna interactions and the different communities supported by trees. The project design

places this transition in the post-monsoon period, when observation can move towards questions of habitat, relationships and interdependence.

In parallel, the team will continue proactive outreach to additional schools, with particular attention to government and aided schools. Meetings with schools that have expressed interest will be pursued, while existing partnerships and networks will continue to be developed.

The immediate focus is therefore on **continuing to observe, returning to the same trees, developing the material already gathered, and beginning to translate these accumulated observations into stories and sound.** The work at VSA has established the first layer of this process, while the team continues to broaden school partnerships and develop the programme across different contexts.