

The average Littlerocker – and deviations from the mean

A class of 1997 case study

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Different yardsticks

What, have you ever wondered, are the different factors that parents consider when having their children admitted to a certain school? Perhaps the number of years the school has been around, definitely the opinion of other parents who have their children studying there, achievements of current students in and outside school, occasionally the general opinion in the local media at large, and more concretely, the ranks/results in the Class X and XII board exams. And given that this is what indeed matters to the parents, schools marketing themselves naturally tend to highlight these very aspects in their prospectus, websites and at every other opportunity for improving public relations.

Now give a thought to the best educational institutions in the country and how they are judged – they have generally been around for a while and with their reputation established over decades, no neighbor's dislike for these institutions will likely change our mind about them. In addition to the above, there is one factor that counts when we speak of higher education, which is seldom mentioned when we talk of schools –the alumni community. In summary, institutions of higher education tend to be judged by the products they produce rather than directly evaluating the administrative and academic processes they employ. This of course is no argument to seek any form of parity between what are essentially different systems. Primary and secondary schooling on one hand and higher education on another have different goals. While the former aims to give students a solid foundation and build character, the latter imparts specialized skills and knowledge. Hence, the disparity in the yardsticks we use to judge them.

In spite of it all, I tend to believe that there is one dimension along which the two yardsticks should meet – in emphasizing alumni achievements more than is currently done. And in emphasizing I mean not just specific noteworthy achievements, but also maintaining a statistical breakup of every graduating class and track their progress through the years. This is a need that arises from two quarters. First, it is one of the most effective forms of feedback. A school that restricts itself to merely monitoring students' performance during their schooling years while making no attempt to know where their students stand in their community years after, are in some sense ignoring the larger reason of their own existence. Secondly, an aspiring student (and consequently a prospective parent) needs to know what kind of peers is he/she likely to have down the years and what is the composition of that rainbow he/she will forever be a part of.

When numbers should not lie

At 25, we are comparatively a young school. This is therefore best time for Little Rock to start such an exercise i.e. to commit itself to tracking the progress of its alumni members as they graduate from school and step out of that 30 acre-campus into a world which doesn't bend over backwards to accommodate them. In order to help Little Rock with such an exercise, we have compiled a limited set of statistics of our graduating class – the Class of 1997.

The Class of 1997 refers to the 5th batch of Little Rockers – these include all Little Rockers who at *some point* were the members of this batch. The ‘1997’ term appears to emphasize the fact that these students appeared in the Class X board exams in March 1997 – whether at Little Rock or elsewhere. This nomenclature has become fairly standard over the years and that is what shall be used throughout this article.

It is hard to put an estimate on the size of this batch since several students joined and left at some point in time. Specifically in March 1997, this batch was about 144 strong – 82 boys and 62 girls. However, including the many students who were around after or before Class X, the potential size of the batch is likely around 225. Of these, we had access to data from 157 students i.e. we know where they are, what they are doing and we have the means (phone/email/local address) to reach them. This is the sample size of the data we used to compile the statistics we present in this article. Since the size is rather small and since the data we compiled were not through personal interviews but from our own knowledge and that of others, we suspect that there may be an error of less than 2-3% in the figures we present. In short, these figures are meaningful and say a story.

The Class of 1997 story

Presence at Little Rock

As mentioned before, for the purpose of this article, we consider the Class of 1997 reported here to consist of 157 students – 91 boys and 66 girls. Of these, slightly over two-third i.e. 66.87% of the students have studied at Little Rock for at least 5 years or more. In fact, of the students who did study at least 5 years, more than half i.e. 53.3% of them went on to study for 10 years. This says something about why Little Rock may be the best school of its kind around and that once you join Little Rock, its unlikely you will leave unless you really have to. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of those who did leave Little Rock, did so either in Class X in order to change syllabi or if not, after Class XII. You cant stay in Little Rock beyond Class XII, can you !

Education

One of the more interesting statistics shown in Fig. 1.0 shows what students who graduated from Little Rock have been doing since Class XII (the year 1999) . 53% of the students have entered technical fields, 19% have entered medical/dentistry and paramedical fields, while the remaining 28% chosen the arts, commerce, business stream after class XII.

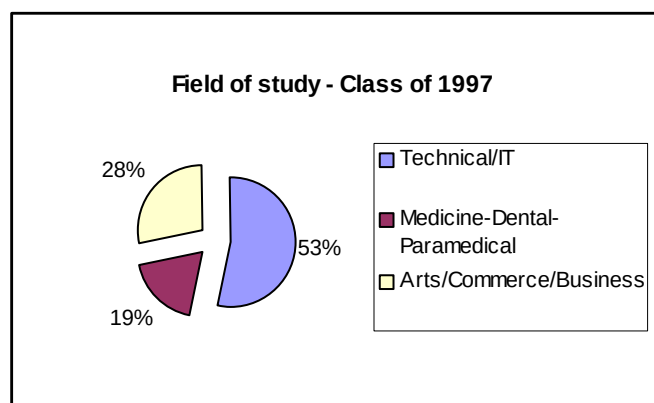


Figure 1.0 : Streams of study chosen

While these figures are valuable in themselves, even more insight is available in Fig 2.0 where we look at a gender-wise split to see the percentage of boys and girls who choose the 3 broad streams.

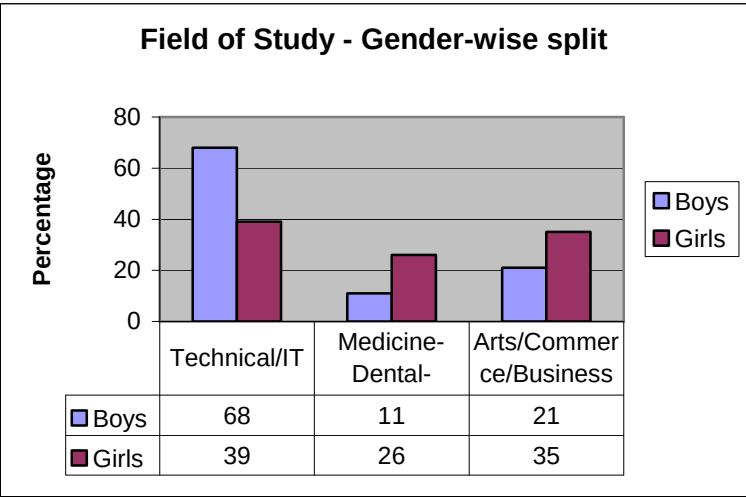


Fig. 2.0 : Gender-wise split for fields of study

The 3 streams have been near uniformly preferred among the girls, whereas the boys have shown a dominant inclination towards engineering and allied fields. 68% of the boys versus 39% of the girls have chosen technical fields, while barely 11% of the boys have chosen to study medicine/dentistry. Although in some sense this reinforces the common stereotype of male preference for technical fields, there is a word of caution here. Engineering is still the top choice (39%) for girls even if by a slender margin. This appears to have more to do with the availability of jobs and also parents opening up to the idea of girls in engineering compared to say 15 years ago. In this sense, it mimics the nation-wide trends that show increase in female enrollment in colleges and IT sector jobs. Of course, another factor that plays out is that medical education tends to be more expensive and long drawn compared to Engineering. Although it might be politically incorrect to state this, a significant number of parents would like to have the girls complete their education at the earliest before they are ‘married off’ and would not encourage the long haul thing that medical education tends to be.

A closely related statistic points to how many of them have continued to study after obtaining our first degree i.e. opted for post-graduation. Of the 91 boys, we know 19 i.e. nearly 18% who have either completed their post-graduate studies or are currently in the process. The corresponding number for the girls is 18, which amounts to 27.2%. Of these 37 (19+18) students, 10 of them – 7 boys and 3 girls are pursuing higher studies abroad – mostly in the United States. It must be borne in mind that these figures are subject to change over the years. Depending on the stream chosen, the students completed their undergraduate studies either in 2002 (3 year undergraduate programs), 2003 (engineers) or 2004 (medical/dental graduates). Most of these are currently working and many of them plan to pursue higher education in the next 1-3 years.

The higher rate for girls than boys have their reasons too. Firstly, the number of girls pursuing medicine is more than the boys and current economic scenario provide a stronger incentive for the medical graduates to specialize. On the other hand, the current job opportunities are

excellent even for fresh out of college engineers and there appears no need and definitely no hurry for engineers to go back to 2-3 years of grueling post-graduate studies. Informal discussions suggest that significant number of engineering graduates currently working in companies are trying to “take it easy” for a while!

Where did they go!

Although Little Rock does have residential/boarding facility, most students would count the larger Dakshina Kannada and immediate surrounding districts among their native places. How have things changed now, now that the kind of jobs available in plenty is mostly restricted to urban centers? Over what geographical regions has the Class of 1997 spread itself over, if at all? Considering Little Rock as the epicenter, our data shows that nearly 72% of them are in Karnataka, a sizeable 20% are abroad and the remaining small share are elsewhere in India. This infact has less to do with Littlerockers not traveling far beyond their immediate surroundings and more to do with the good fortune of having Bangalore, India’s IT destination in our backyard! Therefore, among those in Karnataka, students are either based in Bangalore mostly employed as IT professionals or working/studying/settled in Dakshina Kannada itself.

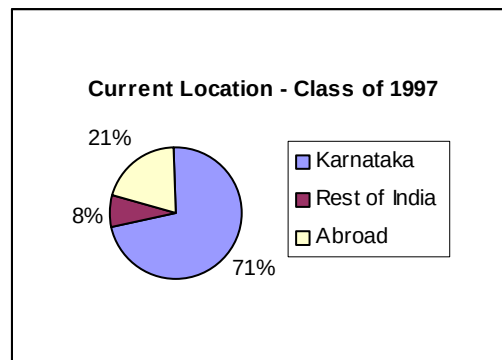


Fig. 3.0 : Current Location – the geographical spread

Here again, a gender wise split throws up interesting interpretations. As shown in the figure, there are very few girls who are based in India but outside Karnataka, only about 1.5%, which infact is just 1 individual whose native happens to be outside Karnataka ! This figure however is larger for the boys, being nearly 12%, mostly employed/studying in urban centers of Bombay and occasionally Hyderabad/Madras. In some sense, this reflects that even in today’s world, the boys are likely to have more latitude in working in a place of their choice, especially if that is far away from home.

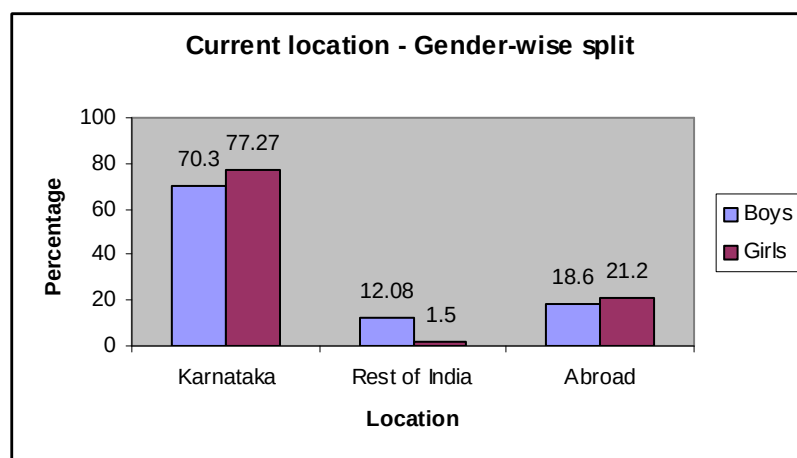


Fig. 4.0 : Current Location – Gender-wise split

Introspection

Although perhaps early to make a judgment, why have our peers not yet branched into and not yet seen making their mark in some offbeat professions – law, writing, painting, fashion, art/theatre/music and journalism. Granted that there are few such ‘positions’ and it would be statistically inconsistent to have a single class produce a significant number of these.

Nevertheless this is exactly what well-established schools in our urban centers do – produce more than just technologists and medical professionals. While it is too early and therefore, unfair to Little Rock to make such a comparison, this is exactly what we must aspire to do. The 25th anniversary might be a good occasion to review how much emphasis we lay on liberal arts education.

Conclusion

Now that we know quite a bit about one batch, a few other things would be interesting to know. Firstly, how these trends differ across batches. Ofcourse, different batches are at different stages of maturity and accomplishment and that would have to be taken into account. Secondly, we must evaluate the extent to which our trends reflect larger societal trends. More importantly, we must measure the extent of our departure from societal trends because in some sense, the more Little Rock deviates from the mean, that is, the more different we are from the ‘average school’, the better off we are!