

Site visit to Hijli Inspiration by Anuradha Bulusu, Asha Atlanta – October 22, 2016

I met with the Founder/Coordinator of Hijli Inspiration Dr. Chandreeyi Das, the guidance counselor Dr. Kasturi Mukherjee and the various teachers and staff of Hijli Inspiration who work with the students on October 22, 2016.

Hijli Inspiration conducts backup coaching support of children in all grades (primary, middle and high school). Hijli Inspiration also conducts Spoken English and Computer Training for children from Kolkata's slums through the support of Smile India Foundation. Inspiration selects students from its centers (that Asha for Education supports among others) and hires teachers to conduct the Spoken English and Computer training. Job placements are done through both Smile Foundation and Inspiration's connections within Kolkata.

In addition, Hijli Inspiration has been conducting a series of workshops on Gender Equality and Sensitivity for 40 adolescent boys aged 9-15yrs. These workshops were designed and conducted on behalf of Asha Atlanta as part of an effort to increase awareness on gender issues among adolescent boys. By the time I visited the centers, a total of three workshops had been conducted lasting for about 9-10 hours over a 1.5 to 2 month period. The workshops thus far consisted of ice-breaking sessions for both boys and girls followed by sessions on gender perception and differences etc. Most of the boys also received some initial counseling on dealing with family pressures and living conditions. Most children in the slums come from highly stressful situations given their family situation and the surrounding environment. Dr. Mukherjee believes that unless the stress and issues of the everyday life are addressed as a first step, the boys may not be able to absorb and understand the deeper issues related to sex, gender and other related issues.

I spoke to the teachers of the three centers who interact with the boys on a day-to-day basis. They reported a substantial improvement in the boys' attitude in the classroom after the initial counseling sessions. The teachers reported that just by having counseling sessions where the boys could express the challenges of their daily lives has made them feel like they are being heard and cared for. They mentioned unlike before where the boys would just take off after class, many of the boys would offer to help the teachers with carrying their teaching material or offer to clean up after class.

Dr. Kasturi Mukherjee gave some anecdotal examples on the influence of Bollywood movies on the way the boys perceived gender roles for men and women in society. The boys were asked to make up stories about a boy and girl and invariably all stories would end with the boy saving the girl. When asked to explore why the girls needed saving, almost all boys explained that typical Bollywood movies portray the women as helpless and in need of being saved by the bad guys. Sadly, the same movies seem to affect girls in a negative way as well where most girls in the center perceive themselves as helpless and unable to rise above their circumstances. It will be interesting to see the impact of the workshops both in the short term and long term once the entire series has been concluded.

