Site visit report: Arpita Sharma ( Asha Berkeley Volunteer)

Project: Mera Sahara

Date of visit: 28th Jul 2011

I have been working with Mera Sahara for two days every week for the last two months in Nithari village. The school opens at 8am and runs until 1:30pm Monday through Saturday. Similar to what Vijay has noted previously, the school started in the aftermath of the Nithari case, where 40 kids were abducted and killed in the community. While originally the school had two centers, because it has lost funding from Tech Mahindra, it has reduced to one site with six rooms with one bathroom and one office building. The school supports between 70-100 children. There are five teachers who work at the site, all are from the community. There was originally a sixth teacher, who taught the 3rd grade class and coordinated the school timings, but she has left. She comes from outside the community, and the reduced salaries will not cover her transportation costs.

I usually arrive around 9:30am on Mondays and Tuesday, and one or two Saturdays. The children usually come to the school without eating breakfast, and the school provides free lunch from a Mandir between 11am-12:30pm. There isn't a fixed time for lunch, because it depends on the weather and speed of the person making the food.

The teachers have great difficulty teaching children basic skills because they are not properly trained and the students coming to their classroom change frequently. Most of them often tend to assign students work and then leave the 10-20 kids alone while they speak and mingle with each other. On days that one of the teachers doesn't show up, the students are often left siting alone in a classroom all day, with one teacher taking time out of teaching her own kids to make sure they are present and okay.

I believe this situation will start changing soon because the school has started asking parents to contribute 50 rupees a month to the school as fees. As a result, parents seem to be coming to the site more often to speak directly with teachers about their students work.

Speaking with the teachers and Padmani, I have learned that most of the children at the school are Bangladeshi migrants. They usually come from large families with 5-6 children. Most of the children's mothers work as domestic servants in the nearby homes and father's work as Rickshaw wallas or do odd jobs around the community to earn money. Several of the teachers have complained that the fathers often come home at night drunk and beat the wife and kids.

The community itself is very dirty, with cow dung, trash, and dirty water in every corner of the village. The kids usually play in it when they get free from school. Many of the kids don't have access to clean drinking water and hand soap and proper functioning toilets on a daily basis, so they fall ill frequently. Many the kids also appear to be suffering from infections and anemia, and Nithari suffers regularly from illnesses in September, October, and November. A girl named Netu in third grade has recently started her period, and suffers from fainting spells because of them, and I've seen several of the kids with infections in their arms, knees, throat, etc.

In spite of these terrible conditions, many of the kids at the school are inspiring. They can cook, clean, and help their parents take care of their brothers and sisters, and work with them after school as domestic servants or in fixing bikes. Recently, one student about 15-16 began taking second grade morning classes to learn how to read and write. The boy was an orphan and drove a rickshaw in the evenings to support himself.

In the evenings, the school also runs sewing classes as part of vocational training for women. Everyone is welcome, but usually old ladies and young teenage girls appear to come. The suits they design are quite beautiful, but the program needs more marketing to get women to participate, and partnerships with local shops to sell products.

Overall impression:

I believe this is a good project and should be supported. However, it needs more Asha support in finding local partnerships and funding opportunities. Because the Right to Education Act has passed, and it cannot meet standards to become a recognized school, and is not receiving any additional funds from the government, it is suffering. (we should also ask why it cannot become a recognized school?)

The teaching is not up to the mark but is on par with other projects of similar nature. I have written a report to Jotsna which highlights these issues and will be giving it to her soon.

Hope this helps. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me.

Regards,

-Arpita