

Report of Project Manigal for Narikuravar children at Thiruvanmiyur (year 2016-2017)

Background information

The Narikuravar or gypsy community is a marginalized community economically, socially and educationally and most of the children of this community are left out of the educational system. The families are engaged in garbage cleaning work or in bead selling work. Though many of the gypsy children do get enrolled in school, often they drop out at the primary stage itself, without even stepping into middle school.

Studying in a language which is not their mother tongue, with a different life style from their classmates, they are unable to adjust to the school regimen and refuse to come to school. Travelling constantly disrupts their school cycle. As their learning levels become low, they lose interest in schooling and join their parents at work at a very young age. Project Manigal was started in the gypsy colony of Thiruvanmiyur to address this issue.

Over the years the project has been successful in not only helping the children complete their primary schooling but also to continue their education in middle and high schools in the neighbourhood. The project follows them up throughout their schooling years. Currently 6 children from the colony have passed 10th board exams and a few are continuing beyond 10th, in plus 2 , vocational and college courses.

Chennai Primary School, Indra Nagar

It is the primary school which plays an important role in changing the educational status of the gypsy children. If children are monitored, retained and given learning support at the primary level, they do not drop out and sail through at the next level too.

At the Indra Nagar school , the project posts additional teachers who visit the colony daily to collect the children. Children sometime start getting ready only after seeing the staff. The teachers also ensure that those studying in several neighbourhood middle schools too start for their respective schools. (Most gypsy children opt for schools where already one of their relatives study and refuse to go to others.)



Inside the primary school, the project gives special, individual attention to the gypsy children. Creative teaching and learning materials as well as worksheets are used to keep the children engaged in learning. Individual attention helps the children to catch up with learning even if they miss school for a few days or weeks on account of their travelling life style. The project also uses a laptop and shares with the children a variety of online audio visual aids. The project ensures that the children who pass class 5 attain the necessary learning levels and are better placed to adjust in in class 6, in a new school.



As the gypsy families are engaged in jewellery making using beads and in selling paper flowers too, the project also included art and craft classes relevant to their life style.



Over the years the attendance of the gypsy children has improved and parents too do not disturb them much during school hours. Some even leave the children behind in school during Thiruvizhas or plan their festival visits during weekends. Children no longer run away in the afternoons and are willing to spend the whole day in school. If they absent themselves for long due to visits to other states like Andhra, the project teachers start where they left off and help them to catch up with learning.

Venkatesh rejoined school after dropping out for two years. The project gave him special attention and now he is on par with other children when he leaves class 5. Meera and Shalini too frequently visit Andhra and stay away from school for weeks and they are helped to catch up.

Some Class 1 children do not want to attend or stay for the full day. Parents do not force them and over time they are permanently left out of the school system. The starting of LKG in the Indra Nagar school last year has provided access to early childhood education to the gypsy children. Settling gypsy children early in LKG helps them to adapt to the school situation better. (The neighbourhood balwadi services are often not available to the gypsy children.)

Arya



Santhosh



Children in middle and high schools

In general gypsy children show a lot of promise in primary but as they move to other schools for 6th their interest in schooling wanes. They find it tough to be on time in the mornings and invariably stay away for being late or return back to the colony if they are late. There is mass bunking too. If one misses for sickness, all others stay back.

Many a times, on a Monday or a Friday, gypsy children soak their clothing in a bucket of water and cite lack of uniform as a reason for missing school in higher classes. They undertake group bookings for untimely shows for new releases of films. If thiruvizhas come during

exam time, they are given a miss, which causes resentment in schools. At those times, reasoning with school-going children doesn't work.

Gypsy children like to be in their own groups, talk to the children of their own clan. Segregating them and scattering them in various middle schools helps in some cases for better mingling while in other cases it has the opposite effect. Isolating them from their peers makes them drop out too. Parents too say that their child will not go alone, in the absence of other children.

Dealing with a variety of problems as and when they crop up sensitively helps in preventing them from permanently dropping out of the schools. Parents are often away at work and small impediments sometimes make the children stay away from school. At such times, the project staff talk to the teachers if they are late or physically drop them in school or help them with unfinished project work, replace lost slippers or uniforms or a book etc.

Out of the children that the project had mentored since class 1, three appeared for the class 12 board exams this year. These children found it tough to cope with the pressures and the grilling that goes on in 12th. Attending school full time and then following up with a special class was too much for them. As months went by they tried escape routes, trying to stay away from one session or the other. It was also hard for them to distance themselves from the happenings in the colony- visits to thiruvizhas or movies or part time garbage cleaning work on weekends and holidays. Often their lack of seriousness even in 12th baffled some of the teachers.

But over the months the project followed them up and maintained continuous contact with the school authorities, visiting the high schools every week, interacting with the teachers and monitoring the children's attendance and performance.

Whenever there was a problem, the project followed up in the colony, serving as a bridge between the parents and the school. As teachers interacted with the parents and children, they understood the special problems of the gypsies and were more tolerant and in fact took special interest in them. They monitored the gypsy children regularly and motivated them.

Doriamurugan class 12

Shivaraj-



class12 vasanth class 12



Doraimurugan, one of the class 12 children, had an eye injury in the middle of the academic year. The project supported financially the cost of his surgery and also made arrangements to read out to him or give audio lessons, till he recovered and resumed schooling .

Vikram and Madhavan are studying in class 9. Madhavan constantly shifts between this colony and Kottur and often it becomes difficult to track his attendance. The project maintains communication with the

teachers of his school to enquire about him and other children and monitor their progress.



Vikram class 9
Madhavan class 8



vijay studies in class 9.

G. Arjun class 6

E vijay works on weekends and on holidays and supports himself partially and continues his education. He does not have both parents. In the earlier years the project admitted him in the hostel, but he returned

due to sickness. The project is trying to support him in whatever way it can to help him complete the schooling process.

Out of the five children who completed the primary school last year, one child, Arjun cleared the test and joined class 6 at English medium section of Besant Theosophical School .

Four girls, were admitted to Avvai Home in class 6. Education of girls beyond primary is a serious problem that the project is facing. Parents do not show much enthusiasm in the education of older girls. Girls are also needed for a variety of chores at home.

Shailaja moved to Andhra for a while and joined back school after a gap of two months. In higher classes such long gaps affect their learning. Preeti too constantly moves between this colony and Kottur where her relatives live. Absence of one or two children demotivates the others and makes them bunk school often . Sangeeta went off to Andhra for a few months in class 7 this year and after she returned dropped out of school.



Vocational training

The project is attempting to broaden the occupational avenues of gypsy children. K Sharan, after he dropped out of 9th was admitted to a course on automobile training at Guindy Industrial Training Centre. The project supported his fees, books and uniform and monitored his attendance and he completes the course in June.



**Sharan , ITI guindy
10**

G Vijay, class

Hostel children

In the initial years of the project, the gypsy parents saw hostels as the only option for educating their children. However as more and more children of the colony are able to complete their schooling while staying at home, parents are preferring to educate the children in the neighbourhood schools as day scholars. Currently only 4 children are in the hostel, due to special reasons.

G. Vijay was admitted at Ramakrishna Mission hostel after he finished class 6 at Indra Nagar primary school. Now this year, he has appeared for class 10 board exams.

M. Ajeet too was also admitted to the same hostel after completing 5th and now the child is in class 9.



S Shyam

S Shyam completes class 5 from Sivananda Hostel this year. The family wants to change the hostel and wants to admit him at Ramakrishna Mission Hostel, Mylapore. The project is helping him to get the necessary certificates such as income, caste, Aadhaar card, TC etc., to fulfil the application formalities.

One child was admitted to ICCW hostel and the child is studying in class 2. The child does not have parents. The hostel is educating him in a matriculation school and has identified a sponsor who can support his education.

RTE

Four children are studying in matriculation schools under RTE. The project is interacting with the schools and is arranging additional educational inputs as suggested by the schools

Shaktivel UKG



Vetri – class1



Bharat class 1



Thilothama class 4

Admissions

The gypsy parents are often unaware about the admission procedures and formalities and the inflexible deadlines for various programs. Even if made aware, they take their own time in responding and lose valuable opportunities available to their children in vocational and college courses and in hostels. Even if they respond, their lack of literacy compounds the problem and often they run from pillar to post for obtaining various

clearances and certificates which makes them lose heart easily. Timely intervention by the project in such situations- sharing information, physically showing them the places, negotiating on their behalf with the authorities, filling in forms and getting the supporting material in place helps in settling the children in various institutions. The benefits of these small but important interventions are visible only much later, in the lives of the children.

In summary

- Attitudes to schooling are changing and more and more gypsy parents want to educate their children.
- Schooling is preventing children from joining work force/rag picking profession at a young age. Fewer children start off in the morning with catapults in their hands. Instead they have school bags.
- Additional learning support given to the children, particularly at the primary level, not only helps them to stay in school but also to obtain adequate learning when they leave school after class 5.
- Close monitoring of children at the colony at middle and high school levels and attending to some of the educational needs of the children is helping them continue and complete the school cycle.
- As more and more children get educated, the occupational avenues available to the gypsies are also widening.
- School is changing their hygiene and habits and school-going gypsy children look cleaner and more fresh.

- Having educated youth in the colony who can send emails, Whats App messages, etc., is helping the community in many ways. They are able to read ration cards and other documents, fill in forms and are in a better position to access the various services available to them.
- Education is also helping in breaking barriers and educated gypsy children are better integrating with others.
- Education is also keeping the gypsy children away from activities that bring them in conflict with the law, such as hunting and poaching or scrap collection from under construction buildings.
- The parents are becoming more competent in dealing with all school issues. The project staff initially accompanied them for all admissions in middle schools and for certificate procurement. Over the years the teachers and children in the neighbourhood schools are used to having gypsies amidst them and parents are able to fulfil all the school formalities on their own.

On the whole the educational profile of the gypsy community is changing slowly, but crucial for sustaining this process is the follow up and learning support given at Primary school, which lays the foundation and accommodates the special needs of gypsy children. It is this intervention which is helping to turn drop outs and failures into successful learners. It would have been impossible to bring the gypsy children to the level of class 10 and 12 without the intervention at the primary level.

