

Karthi's fellowship, Jan-Dec 2013, Note by Melli Annamalai, Asha-Boston

Working with 'slow learners'

The initial goal of the fellowship was to work with 'slow learners' in government schools. A 'slow learner' is defined as someone who is well behind the level of learning expected at that grade level. Karthi was a member of the School Management Committee at two nearby government schools by invitation, as the school authorities were anxious to improve pass rates. Karthi had a track record of helping slow learners through specialized tutoring based on the individual needs of a student, and providing a lot of care, concern and attention to the challenges the student faces outside of the learning environment. Bringing that experience to the government schools was identified as a good path to pursue.

Karthi steadfastly believed (and had been proved right time and again) that every 'slow learner' (like the rest of us) has one or two things that he/she could do well, and this skill should be used for the community, this would help everyone and themselves.

Working with slow learners at the government schools has not worked out as planned. The government schools control the time he has with the students. They are marks oriented, and call him and give him access to students just before the exam. Karthi needs regular access to the students and for a longer period of time.

The nature of his work with slow learners fits well with working with slow learners in one's own community – in his case Karumbalai. He then knows (or can find out) any specific family issues. He can interact with them throughout the day, and they also look up to him as an older brother rather than a teacher. So during the first year we decided that working with slow learners within the Seed Narpanigal centers was a more feasible option.

We have had a lot of discussion around testing learning levels for the 'slow learners.' Karthi feels standardized tests will not accurately capture successes. For example, they will not capture things like a student who used to be terrified of English now consults a dictionary. We should work towards a way to measure and quantify the successes. Currently the success is measured by the number of slow learners who pass class X and go on to +2, and pass class XII and go on to college. These are significant markers indeed. Going forward we should capture qualitative successes, and also capture the methodology to be used elsewhere.

Seed Narpanigal mentorship

Also, Karthi's leadership is required for Seed Narpanigal's day-to-day activities, in particular to mentor the volunteer teachers. To enable the goal of a steady and committed stream of volunteers who can work on their own, Karthi has had to do intensive mentoring for the first year the college students are volunteers. He has focused on one-on-one volunteering, asking them to maintain notes of their daily activities. These notes help the volunteers see the benefit of their activities and how simple things like

coming on time, consulting a dictionary can impact students. After one year of mentoring the students are fairly independent for 2 years (typical college degree is 3 years).

The goal here is to work towards a situation where the college students themselves can mentor new volunteers coming in.

Summary

To summarize Karthi's activities on his fellowship:

- Working with slow learners in Seed Narpanigal centers
- Mentoring of college volunteers at Seed Narpanigal and day-to-day activities of the Seed Narpanigal centers

Interesting note:

After many years of working with NGOs, I have come to feel that a key necessity for underprivileged children is the focused attention – the kind of attention the typical middle class child gets from his/her parents. As my friend Ram says – teacher-student ratio in middle class schools is 2:1, meaning 2 parents at home to help, in addition to siblings, cousins, etc.

Karthi's work with "slow learners" attempts to provide this, and the improvements are clear when the children can get that attention.

Very similar work has been reported recently for teenagers in US who are behind the level of learning for their grade level: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/education/intensive-tutoring-and-counseling-found-to-help-struggling-teenagers.html>