Samarth Teertha Kendra Site Visit Report: 12/28/2018

Name of the person visiting: Nithin Poduval

I visited the Samarth Teertha Kendra project on Dec 28th in Juhapura, Ahmedabad. I was introduced to the project coordinator, Rajul by the Asha steward, Rohini. At the project site, I met Mrs. Afroz who is the school principal. Mrs. Afroz and some of her staff have been working in this field for almost 30 years and came off as highly experienced and sensitive to the disabled children’s needs. The Kendra works as a school cum day-care center for mentally retarded children who face more than 75% disability.

I was informed that the school has recently moved to a new facility which has proved to be much more spacious and convenient than the previous location, apart from being well-lit. We entered the hall of the school, which also functions as the office where Rajul gave me a quick overview of the project. Asha currently supports the entire day to day expenses of the project which include food, teacher salaries as well as physical and speech therapy for the kids and transportation. Currently there are 70 kids in the school. They have an additional vocational training program which trains children in making paper plates and other handicrafts which is currently supported by a CSR initiative (I believe this is Wipro).

The children are grouped into 3 classes according to their levels of disability-STK1, STK2, STK3 with STK3 being the group that is most severely handicapped. In addition they have a class for very prekindergarten kids, around 4-6 years old who are part of the early intervention program. The ground floor has a hall which functions as the office as well as the space where physical therapy and speech therapy is performed. While I was visiting, I observed the physical therapy expert working with a child. The prekindergarten kids are situated on the ground floor, while the other kids are taught in different classrooms in the second floor.

In my tour of the facility, I visited the children in all the four classes, most children were very friendly and seemed genuinely happy to see me. The children in STK1 (the most advanced group) were able to call out my name as well as introduce themselves. I was informed that the STK1 students are currently learning letters, names of fruits and simple math. They have even been taken out to the local stores and were able to make simple purchases and interact with the shopkeeper. The teachers in STK2 and STK3 were also attempting to teach similar concepts to their children using different methods however I could see that it was much harder to get their attention. Nevertheless, the teachers were able to make progress using different teaching aids.

As I was informed, the children in the prekindergarten class are much younger and there is a greater possibility of reaching them through early intervention. The parents of these children were more involved in their education as they could find greater motivation through better results.

After my tour, I also had discussions with the physical therapy and speech therapy teachers on their methods. These teachers are practicing professionals in nearby hospitals or clinics and do their best to help the children walk and perform basic speech. They prepare custom programs for each child and also attempt to teach the parents the exercises so that kids can practice on the weekends. The physical
The therapy teacher explained the challenges involved in working with the severely disabled children, some of whom cannot even cry out if a particular movement hurts them. One can only gauge their reactions through facial expressions.

**Parental involvement** - I was unable to meet any parents at the center but I was briefed about their participation. One main goal of the school is to educate the parents and help overcome the stigma associated in society associated with mentally handicapped children. Most parents were initially very ignorant about mental handicap and tend to hide their children, however after seeing the progress of their wards, they get motivated and better involved. The Kendra staff goes to the parents’ houses to teach them the physical therapy exercises so that the children can get exercise on the weekends as well.

**Vocational training** - Apart from providing vocational training like paper plates, the students are also taught to make small handicrafts such as necklaces, ear rings. These are then sold at various fairs and help generate awareness about the school, in addition to funds.

**Future priorities**

1) **Housing issue**

The main issue that the Teertha Kendra is facing currently is the lack of a permanent location for their facility. The new facility that the Kendra is currently housed in is a good improvement over their previous location, however there seems to be a risk of losing the space. Mrs. Afroz informed me that the owner of the house where the school operates is looking to sell the space and they have been visited by potential buyers a few times. Due to the stigma in society, it proved to be very difficult to rent their current facility as most owners are reluctant to rent them places. One option that the Kendra is looking into is purchasing the facility, however this would cost them Rs. 3-4 crores and would require bank loans.

2) **Outreach programs**

I was informed that a couple of kids over the years have been able to graduate from the facility and move to government schools. However a lot of awareness needs to be generated among government school teachers to help the children integrate smoothly and prevent ill-treatment from regular students.

The Kendra is working to conduct more outreach programs among government school teachers, parents to help ensure easy integration of their graduated students.

3) **Doctor visits**

The Kendra places special emphasis on the prekindergarten kids as they have the best chance to integrate through the early intervention program. Currently there are no medical checkups done on these kids, but they would like to bring in a pediatrician to conduct regular medical checkups as well as blood tests.
In summary, the Samarth Teertha Kendra seems to have done a great job in providing disabled children from underprivileged sections of society a chance to live a somewhat normal life. The dedication of the staff is the greatest strength. This was evident in the meticulous records prepared by the staff for each student. One suggestion I had for Rajul is to work with local private schools that might be interested in helping the school with study materials, toys and other resources.

Here are some pictures that I took on my visit-

The school
Hall/Office
Prekindergarten kids
STK 2 classroom kids
STK3 classroom
Vocational training workshop
Handicrafts made by students
Copy of records of student
Area where the school is situated