
Visited By: Ramchandar Krishnamurthy

I recently spent 4 days in Timbaktu in June 2009, spending time equally in Timbaktu Badi and Prakriti Badi. Here is a short report on my impressions of these two schools.

What did I do?

- I spent 4 days in the two schools and the resource center.
- I attended classes in the primary stage (Telugu writing) and 6th standard (science and maths) in Timbaktu badi.
- I sat in the 8th/9th combined science class in Parkruti Badi where the teacher taught the names of elements.
- I ate lunch with the children on all days.
- I conducted a maths class for the 8th and 9th students.
- I attended a maths class in Prakruti Badi for the 3rd standard students.
- I attended an English class in Prakruti Badi for the 3rd standard students and 10th students.
- I spent time in the resource center getting introduced to the various materials that the center creates.
- I spent time talking to Subbaraju about the various aspects of running the school.
- I attended an evening meeting of the teachers and Chiguru administrators.

My Observations

Teachers and teaching

In all the classes I sat through the teachers had come well prepared for the topic they were going to cover. Almost all classes had the pattern where the teacher first refreshed the memories of the students on what was done in the previous class. They then introduced the new topic, had some writing exercises and some follow up work. The teachers never used the textbook when introducing and discussing a topic. For e.g. the 6th standard science teacher was explaining the composition of gases in the atmosphere and it was in the nature of a discussion rather than the teacher covering the lesson in the textbook. She explained the various gases and encouraged the students to think about how these gases were getting created or utilized. She talked about CO2 and made linkages with photosynthesis and Nitrogen with leguminous plants. It was really an excellent class. The 6th math teacher was teaching the square-root of a fraction and even that class was done very well with various methods of calculation being explored. Once the topic was thoroughly explored the children went back to their textbooks. The teaching here in these schools are of very high caliber which is rarely found even in well run urban private schools.

I had a discussion with Subba about the quality of teaching and it appears that Timbaktu has a well thought out process. The teacher recruitment is rigorous. They just don't look at qualifications but also conduct an entrance exam and interview. Candidates who pass through this are asked what subject they would like to teach and then they are asked to come prepared in that subject area for another exam. This process ensures that the teachers are of high quality to begin with. This high expectation of quality is matched with higher salaries. The teachers are reasonably well paid and also get other benefits like food and also for those in Timbaktu Badi, lodging. There is also continuous in-service training that happens during vacations and holidays. This training is reflected in some of the standardized practices I observed in several classrooms.

It was also good to see teachers participate in decision making in a democratic manner. In the evening teacher's meeting the monthly budget for the program was discussed openly with all teachers. The teachers are treated as equals without hierarchy and this I am sure in turn is translated to the teacher's behavior towards students.

The only area where I could offer some suggestion for improvement is in the English language learning. As far as I understanding any language learning is first the oral language. Actually language is speaking and hearing (the script, writing and reading has come thousands of years after humans starting speaking language). Even in our first language we hear, comprehend and speak first. Only later we learn to read and write in that language. If Timbaktu schools want to teach...
English as a language I think there needs to be more opportunity for students to hear and speak in English before and along with their learning to read and write the English script.

**Students**
Almost all students were confident and curious. They had no inhibitions or fears in approaching visitors like me and having conversations with us. I had opportunity to interact with some of the students closely, mainly the 8th and 9th class in Prakruthi badi during their math class and 2nd and 3rd in Prakruthi badi during their math class again. In all these interactions, especially in the higher classes I found that the children had difficulty in retaining what they had learnt. This was the beginning of the school year and they have come back after a long vacation and this could be a possible reason. The 8th and 9th class students had difficulty in remembering how to solve basic linear equations, percentages etc. I have noticed this problem in students from difficult backgrounds in other schools too (government school in Bangalore, Puvidham in Tamil Nadu). I had always thought that the school processes were not rigorous enough and hence there were problems in retention. But I can clearly see that the Timbaktu schools have very good processes and also very good teachers. I guess there are so many factors that affect the learning and retention of learning in a child that go beyond the classroom. I think I need to understand this further with Timbaktu, I have not talked to Subba about this concern yet.

**Infrastructure**
Timbaktu Badi school is open and airy. The classrooms are either in verandas or open spaces. There did not seem to be any dearth of space. In Prakruthi Badi some of the classrooms were small. They could at the most hold 10 students. If class sizes increase there could be a problem of holding them comfortably.

**Nutrition**
I ate lunch all the 4 days with the children both in Timbaktu Badi and Prakruti Badi. The children get very healthy food – vegetables, millets, greens, buttermilk etc. The millets are organically grown and I guess they get more nutritious food than even kids of privileged backgrounds.

**Resource Center**
The resource center is a fantastic space with all facilities for children to engage with learning. The teachers use the center to prepare for their classes and use the computers effectively for creating worksheets etc. There is a monthly magazine, facilities for lab work, crafts and all sorts of things. I have not spent enough time exploring all the contributions made by the resource center, but I can see it is being used effectively.

**Issues**
Enrollment seems to be an issue. The lower classes in Prakruti Badi have very few children. Even though the overall budget would go up if there are more children the per cost child would still come down since the fixed expenses are almost 2/3rd of the overall cost. It is not just financially efficient but even the teacher's time and energy can be effectively utilized with more number of children. There are several reasons for this low enrollment some of which cannot be addressed by the school. There is demand for English medium schools and schools that enforce “strict discipline” and uniforms and boots. All education theory points to the effectiveness of teaching in the local language in primary grades. Pandering to the demands of uninformed parents cannot be a solution. There is one issue which according to my opinion can be addressed. A lot of the parents are concerned since the school is not recognized. I am not clear why Timbaktu has not registered its schools. Also, possibilities for consolidating the two schools together can be explored. Would it be more effective to bus the children to one place?

**Conclusion**
The Timbaktu schools are very well run schools. They provide an excellent opportunity for children from very difficult circumstances to learn in a friendly and humane environment which provides very high quality of education. The school processes are very well thought out and implemented. There could be some changes like increasing the enrollment to make more efficient use of resources. Asha for Education should whole-heartedly support these schools.