

Site visit to Sahyog-Sangharsh, a non-formal education center for children with disabilities, Ghatkopar, Mumbai

By Madhuri

Date of visit: July 17th 2015

About the visit: I have been a supporter of the Danbury Chapter of Asha for Education since it first started. After Abby and Rucha's visit to Sahyog-Sangharsh in 2013 and 2014, I was keen on a site visit to the school so I could gain an understanding of ground realities and provide my feedback to the team. I conducted my visit to the center on Friday, July 17th at 2 pm.

Travel: I spoke with Beena Choksi, school director prior to my visit and went there with my brother, and my 2 sons-ages 12 and 8 years. The school is located in Asalfa neighborhood of Ghatkopar (West) in the suburb of Mumbai. The neighborhood is accessible from Ghatkopar station and was a 10 minute uphill walk from the main road. The streets leading to the school are very narrow, and can't be accessed by four wheeler vehicles. So, we walked. Men were seen loitering and hanging out on the streets and there were few to none women out there. The area is mostly residential, with 'chawl' type community. Soon, I found myself lost with the directions and was glad that I had my brother alongside; we managed to make it to the school.

At the school: I was received by Ruvina, the community coordinator who told me about the challenges they faced when the school moved to the area 2-3 years ago. It took them time to build trust and gain support from the community. Ruvina introduced me to the staff members and showed me around. The day of my visit coincided with a festival when children were dispersed half a day early from school. So, my time was spent talking with teachers and Ruvina, and checking out the site where children spend their day. The center is a non-formal education type school that caters to education of children with disability. About 20 children attend the school and there are currently 3 boys and 4 girls of ages 15-19 years.

Being my first visit to a non-formal education center and not knowing what to expect, I thought the space was tight. There was one main room where younger children were taught, a kitchen area that was split in to an area for preparing meals and a section where the older children studied, a small library, and a bathroom. A typical day starts at 10:30 am and ends at

3:30 pm, with lunch served at 12:30 pm. Lunch is free and is prepared in the kitchen. Children are provided with uniforms and study material free of cost and are also reimbursed for travel.

What I was struck by were the efforts of teachers, their passion and a determination to make the children independent. When a child is enrolled, a baseline for the child's development and abilities is documented. Education is tailored and customized to the needs of each child. Children are not just taught how to read and write, which in itself is a challenging task, but are also trained in social and life skills. For example, the staff takes children along to a pharmacy so they learn to have their prescriptions filled and to interact for their medical needs. Children are also accompanied in trains and buses and are taught to travel independently. On site they are taught to cook in the kitchen under supervision and to be independent. A few children belong to migrant laborers from UP and MP and lack an understanding of their rights when they are enrolled. To help the children avail of government medical aid in hospitals, the center took an initiative to help them with documentation to obtain disability certificates. In addition to the regular staff, there are trainees from SNDT University and Tata Institute who attend the center twice a week and assist with the activities. Street plays are conducted to sensitize the community on social and women's issues, increase awareness, and on topics related to celebrations and festivals.

Challenges: A part of teachers' time is spent in the kitchen preparing food and in preparing daily charts. Teachers/supporting staff draw pictures on the charts and admitted that they could spend more time teaching children. It made me think about coordinating with Beena at Sahyog on topics for their posters and charts and having the youth in the Danbury area prepare charts using powerpoint on topics of interest to the center. This way, all they would need to do is take color printouts there. What a nice way to involve our children and youth from Danbury while serving the needs of the project in India!

In summary: I saw sincerity, a need for funds and a need for help. Financial support for operational expenses, adding books to library, a bigger and better place for the children in future, and help to free up teachers valuable time for teaching will be appreciated and will go a long way for Sahyog. There is no other school in the area that caters to needs of children with disabilities.

So, I would recommend support for this project. All in all, an enriching experience for me.
Below are a few pictures from my visit captured by my 12-year old son.





