Visit to REWARD Trust, December 22, 2021.

Visit by Subashree Rajagopal, Asha Volunteer

Nearly 70% of children in India go to government schools. Government schools are the only option in most rural areas. So when the government school shut down for 2 years due to the pandemic, rural children were cut off from any meaningful access to learning.

REWARD trust works exclusively with government schools. When the schools shut down, the trust not only continued working, but ramped up their operations - their teacher training, student outreach, and government school support in order to address the learning loss experienced during the shut down. The teachers started volunteer street classes for children in their neighborhood. The trustees conducted a rigorous training program for the teachers, and teachers used this time to hone their skills, increase their understanding of subject matter, and practiced teaching classes. Teachers were assigned to groups and given projects to work on. Teachers went door to door, distributing lessons, setting up whatsapp, collecting homework, and teaching students at their doorsteps.

During the pandemic, I was able to get a view into the training provided by the trust. I had arranged for three of the trust’s teachers to start working remotely with three students in California 1:1 doing Science Experiments, Math / Language / History / Computer Science lessons. The students were in 5th grade, 3rd, and 1st grades. One teacher was a High School Chemistry teacher, Tchr. Kannan, the second teacher was a High School Computer Science Teacher, Tchr. Punithavathy, and the third teacher was Tchr. Poongothai, a primary school teacher. The teachers worked with the students and guided them through on-line Math using Khan Academy online content, (https://www.khanacademy.org/) and also guided them through conducting science experiments using the California Exploratorium “Science Snacks” program. (https://www.exploratorium.edu/snacks)

The teachers worked with the primary school students and engaged them in interesting ways. They taught the children folk songs. One teacher showed the child a live feed of a chicken hatching from an egg. She showed eggs getting incubated in her family coop. The student has now developed an active interest in life sciences and has adopted a chicken from a local farm. She showed native plants around her home, demonstrated plants reacting to external stimuli for a lesson in Biology. The Chemistry teacher guided the students through extracting DNAs of several fruits, and leaves and walked the student through varying the parameters of the experiment to identify controlling factors and tracing cause / effect.
He taught the student how to create a lab journal and record the experiment. They worked on making a penny battery, and made a pinhole camera. He guided the student through making crystals. They learned about COVID - the virus and the vaccines.

All three teachers would come up with original ways of engaging the students. Either by starting the day with a joke, or showing the children new born kittens, or by singing a song with them. The students made tremendous progress over the summer, on their Math and Tamil skills. The 5th grader developed an active interest in Science and continues to dabble in Science experiments and loves Biology.

All of the teachers are current teachers with the Trust, and have been trained by the Trust. They were each wonderful teachers, and knew their subjects, knew how to engage the students, and knew how to keep the student’s interests going. More than anything, they were caring and kind teachers.

In December 2021, I was able to make a trip to Kalavathi’s home, and meet with one of the teachers who had worked with the 5th grader from CA. Since the pandemic was still raging, schools were just
re-opening. I spoke to students from Pandur High School, and saw several trust supported schools along the way. They were all opening in phases, some of them were open for the higher grades, some of them were doing alternate days, and some were doing morning and afternoon shifts. I did not visit any schools, or meet any more teachers due to the pandemic.

However, the experience of directly watching the teachers work with the students remotely gave me insight into how well Reward’s training model is working. I feel that this highly trained set of teachers will be invaluable assets to any school they teach in. These 60-70 teachers are improving the quality of learning in the government schools they work in, school by school, classroom by classroom, and child by child.

Over the years, REWARD Trust’s model has been able to evolve from addressing teacher shortages, to making a meaningful impact on the quality of learning at rural government schools. They are building the capacity of teachers, and these teachers in turn are improving the quality of learning in a large set of under-resourced government schools serving a majority of the working poor families.