

Reward trust Site Visit 2017

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Nearly 70% of children in India go to government schools. Government schools are the only option in most rural areas. Any educational intervention at scale has to address the government school system. The government has done a good job building schools – at least a primary school – within 1 mile of over 90% of India's population, but the schools face many problems, from not enough teachers, to infrastructure issues, to poor quality of learning.

In my work in Asha I have mostly focused on projects that are working to transform the government school system. REWARD trust shares a similar goal of focusing on government schools, and I have long been interested in visiting them and learning first-hand about the work they do.

This was my first visit to the schools REWARD trust works with. I started the day with breakfast at Sridhar and Kalavathy's home. They are an extraordinary couple. They are devoted and committed to the task of working with the government schools around their home. They live in one of the townships around Kalpakkam, so while their township is urban the neighborhood itself is in a rural area. For many years they have had the practice of hosting four students from the surrounding village government schools. The students live with the family during the school year. Sridhar and Kalavathy teach them, mentor them, and include them in all the impromptu scientific discussions that happen when friends and colleagues visit. The students get exposure to various ideas and thoughts, like other typical middle class children, exposure they will not get in their own homes. I really commend them for this. Two such former students joined us for the day. Both were finishing their Ph.D (one in Chemistry and one in Physics), one was going to start a post-doc in China, another was joining IISER, Kolkata, for a post-doc.

During breakfast the two women who were helping in the kitchen came to the dining room to be introduced and say hello, an example of Sridhar and Kalavathy's egalitarian outlook. Ananthi, who functions as the treasurer for REWARD trust, also joined us for the day. Ananthi is also highly committed to the work.

REWARD Trust's model is simple. They hire and appoint additional teachers in schools. When they began this work (about 13 years ago), they were addressing severe teacher shortages, where there would be only 1 or 2 teachers in a school for 100-200 children. Just appointing additional teachers was enough to improve learning levels. Teacher shortage is less severe now, so part of the focus now is quality of education, which is the need of hour in schools across India, and in particular in government schools. Schools are better staffed these days, and more children pass the SSLC exam (partly due to diluted grading standards) but the learning levels are really low in most schools. This of course has a large impact on how students fare after class X and class XII.

The REWARD trust model remains the same with this is expanded focus of looking at quality of education – REWARD trust hires teachers, appoints them to schools, and works closely with these teachers throughout the school year. They work with schools when the HM approaches them and requests help. They use three criteria to decide whether to work with a school: (1) teacher-student ratio lower than 1:40, (2) lack of at least one teacher per class or section, and (3) lack of specific subject teachers. They retain teachers at a school (subject to funds availability) if the above conditions are met after they appoint teachers, but the teacher-student ratio is low - lower than 1:10 for primary, 1:20 for middle school, and 1:30 for high school. They work with primary, upper primary and high schools, there is no preference for one level over the other. The main thing is the school should approach them. After they decide to work with a school, they next need to hire a teacher for that school. REWARD trust includes the HM and the village panchayat leader when conducting the interview.

Sridhar shared an interesting story on the value of this. They were interviewing a Maths teacher, and the applicant's knowledge was much less than desired. REWARD was about to reject the applicant when the HM pointed out that the teacher had a lot of enthusiasm and a good communication style. REWARD hired this teacher and in a year they saw tremendous progress in the teacher, and he has been a very good teacher. The HM was right. Involving the panchayat leader gives the community a sense of ownership in the project. The panchayat leaders also ask good questions during the interview. The general goal in the interviews is to see how well they will teach in class. They believe content can be taught after they are hired, if necessary.

Every 4th Saturday the teachers come for a training session. Sometimes REWARD trust members provide training, sometimes they have lectures from outside experts. The teachers bear their own travel expenses. They all come without fail, that is one of the requirements if you are a REWARD trust teacher. A few years ago, REWARD started "SMART tests" for students. These are tests/quizzes for students in classes 6-9, conducted three times a year (class 10 is not included because they are under a lot of pressure for the SSLC exam). The tests are based on material in the textbooks, but the questions are not from the textbook. The idea is to encourage the children to think beyond just the questions in the textbook. Cash prizes are given to the winners. Schools have come to really value these tests, and schools that win the prizes are proud. Students want to do well and win prizes. This is a good initiative to start thinking beyond the textbook, given that school education otherwise is focused on memorizing only what is in the textbook. (I cannot stress enough how bad this current state of education is for any kind of reasoning ability and critical thinking.) After the tests the question papers are discussed in class. The REWARD trust teachers are also encouraged to take the test home and answer the questions. They are welcome to read anything, and discuss with each other or anyone else before taking the test. REWARD only requests that during the test they don't talk with anyone else. **To my mind, these tests are one of the more important interventions by REWARD.** This is potentially encouraging the children to think beyond the textbook. As I said earlier, if teacher shortages are not so acute now, these are essential interventions to improve the quality of education.

My Visit Kalkulum Middle School

We started the school visits with the upper primary school at Kalkulum. A social studies lesson for class VIII was in progress, by a REWARD trust teacher, Tchr Kannan (a undergraduate in Chemistry). I was struck by two things – how small the class was, and how there were twice as many girls as there were boys. While driving down from Chennai I had noticed numerous resorts and other economic development activity along the main road. Tourist sites like Mahabalipuram might have contributed to this, and also Chennai is perhaps spilling over. These villages are not too far from those areas, so perhaps there are now enough private English medium schools there that many children go to. Families might be sending the boys there, while the girls go to the local government school. This is a pattern I observed in all three schools I visited. (In later discussions Ananthi noted that there is a trend of increasing demand for government schools, for example in Pandur and Kariacheri Primary Schools. This is a great achievement by REWARD.

Action item for Asha: Asha should track this, and look at the numbers, and understand the reasons (is it largely due to REWARD's work?). This is something we should consider a big success of the project.

We had a good discussion with the children at Kalkulum school. The Jalli Kattu issue was at its height, and all the children chorused that Jalli Kattu should continue because it was a traditional sport. When we walked in the classroom the practice of Sati and how it was banned was being discussed. So I asked, "At that time what if someone had said Sati was a traditional practice and should continue?" We didn't have an opportunity to have a good discussion around it, but this is the type of questioning and critical thinking that I hope we can foster in all schools we work with. The children didn't know me, and were shy, so it would have been difficult to have a real discussion, but I wish I could have had that.

We asked the students to read some passages from the textbook. I felt the reading skills could be better. Perhaps this is all we can do when we add only one teacher to a school. The rest of the teachers continue teaching the way they usually teach, and if there are gaps in reading skills they perpetuate as students move to higher classes. Adding one teacher can only do so much.

This brings me to a question I often have – we are clearly seeing improvement in REWARD trust schools. Should we be happy with that improvement (it has had many successes including a student who recently got a merit seat in a Chennai engineering college), or aim for more, where the reading and writing of every student is improved?

Neelamangalam Primary and High School

The next stop was Neelamangalam school. Here we spent time in class II, being taught by a REWARD trust teacher, Tchr Bharathi. She is clearly committed and enjoys working with the children. We spent some time working with the children and helping them spell on the board. (I discussed with REWARD later about special training for teachers working with very

young children, and whether any particular educational qualification is required. Ananthi's response is later in this report.) This is a larger school, and when we arrived the midday meal was in progress. Ananthi and Kalavathy had packed a picnic lunch (for the six of us travelling together that day!), and we all ate lunch under the shade of a tree just outside the school. It was a lot of fun.

Pandur Primary School

Our last stop was at the Pandur school. Here we stopped in at class III, in the English medium section, taught by REWARD trust teacher Tchr Thangeswari. This is where it hit me that this is what the English medium implementation in government schools looks like. For one thing, English medium presents new challenges for the schools because finding teachers to teach in English to an English medium class is not easy. HMs ask REWARD trust for help, and there are two teachers at this school, working with English medium classes. The second thing I observed really bothered me. There were about 30 students in the English medium section, and only around 6 students in the Tamil medium section. (Both classes were in the same room, in two sides of a large room.)

I don't know what goes through the Tamil medium children's minds. Do they wonder why they are in a smaller class? Do they feel they are "inferior" in some way because they are in the Tamil medium section and not the English medium section? What do they think when the English medium section is chanting English nursery rhymes? Do they feel envious and left out? I went over to the Tamil medium section and asked the teacher how the language section is decided for each child. She said it is decided in class I, when the child enters school, and I didn't get a clear idea on what the criteria was. (Sridhar later said this was the parents' choice.) I have serious reservations about learning in English medium when the teachers' command of English is limited. Without a command of the language expressing oneself, teaching in it, learning in it, all becomes hard. The teachers probably keep falling back on Tamil. The children end up in a situation where they are simultaneously learning the subject and the language the subject is taught in, at the same time. (You can easily put yourself in their shoes by thinking of learning a new language – say Spanish – while also learning Social Science in Spanish.) The children are likely not exposed to English at home at all, so they really have to learn the language along with other subjects in school. This must push them more towards the path of rote memorization.

And after I saw the Tamil medium section – the small size, saw them look somewhat longingly at the English medium side of the class (perhaps that was just because we were visiting and engaging with the English medium children), I am really uncomfortable about having two sections, especially side by side. I would guess that the poorest children are in the Tamil medium section. There is nothing REWARD trust can do about it, I am just sharing my thoughts here.

We also briefly visited REWARD trust teacher Tchr Sangeetha's class I at the Pandur school.

Some thoughts

1. The SMART tests are a good step towards improving quality of education. Can more be done? In particular, can we encourage the children to read, especially the younger ones? The habit of reading is helpful lifelong, and books can be wonderful teachers. Can we consider a small library in the primary and upper primary classes (and high schools too) if possible?

I recognize there are associated needs - someone to maintain the library, keep track of the books, etc. I do not know whether REWARD teachers have time for that.

Ananthi's response: It's mandatory for all the primary schools to have Puthaga Poongothu at their schools. (A collection of small stories in Tamil & English). The effectiveness depends on the functioning of the school. Some new schools like Sembur, Poigai Nallur primary schools have a good library and insist us to donate more books. REWARD generally donates books along with board games for the annual day functions of the schools.

Action item for Asha: We should track this effort more closely to see how much this helps.

2. Can the teaching by REWARD teachers be supplemented with discussions on interesting topics of the day? For example, the type of discussion around Sati – a debate on when should traditional practices be challenged might be a way to open the children's minds to new ideas. For this to work REWARD teachers will have to be trained first, and then they have to find the time in the classes. Such discussions have spurred creative thinking in other projects.

My basic point above is – is there something more that can be done within the current structure?

Adding a teacher helps, SMART tests help, should we start thinking beyond that now? Should we aim to be at a point where every student can read well? And start thinking for themselves?

3. REWARD covers 45 schools in two blocks (which have 150 schools each). Out of these 45 schools, some are primary schools, some are upper primary schools, some are high schools. I would like to understand whether there are connections between these schools. Are there sets of schools where REWARD works with the complete chain - the primary school, the upper primary school that it feeds into, and the high school that it feeds into? Better still is there a set of schools where REWARD works with all the primary schools that feed into an upper primary school and then into high school? From other projects I have begun to feel we need to intervene throughout the chain in these types of projects to get to a level where everyone can read well, write well, do basic arithmetic and think for themselves. If REWARD works with such sets of schools we can explore additional interventions that are possible.

4. Is there any intervention possible to improve English learning in the Tamil medium sections? English is essential today, and anything we can do to make them feel less like second class citizens would be great. Sridhar points out that finding English teachers and English medium teachers is a big challenge in this area. All our projects face this challenge (lack of teachers who can communicate in English). As discussed above the suggestion I have for Asha is try to a large reading program, giving access to children to a lot of books. Encouraging reading is good for both sections. Reading is one aspect of language learning. The only projects which successfully teach English do so because of consistent exposure to English over a number of years, beyond school textbooks. We have to understand what exists now, and see how we can build on it.

5. A side effect of REWARD's work is the youngsters from the villages, who get hired as teachers, have the opportunity to evolve in terms of their thinking critically and out-of-the box. My guess is they attend poor quality colleges themselves, but with REWARD they have an opportunity learn new things. I would like to understand into the nature of the monthly teacher training and understand that better.

6. I brought up the issue of working with the existing government school teachers in the 45 schools REWARD works in. After all, if the HM has approached REWARD, there is interest from the school, from the HM at least. What can we do to improve their teaching, and their knowledge and critical thinking? Sridhar thought that was impossible because the teachers are strong in their union and have no incentive to improve themselves.

However, they are seeing some impact on government school teachers. I have included some points from subsequent email discussion with REWARD on this topic. When we only work with outside teachers it also means that the work has to go on indefinitely. With a change in the system itself (in this case teachers who are already in the government school system) there is some hope of the system being able to be on its own one day. (In another project we have been able to get the government school teachers very excited about learning but showing how much fun it is to learn. Those teachers have become very empowered and engaged teachers.)

Additional discussion with REWARD trust on email

I had some additional discussion with REWARD on the above points via email.

Here are some salient points, which were not clear in the site visit because I did not interact with the government school teachers much.

1. REWARD is seeing impact of the REWARD appointed teacher on the government appointed teachers. The children in score high marks in subjects that the REWARD teachers teach (consistently over 90%). This has triggered healthy competition among government school teachers, so that in some subjects government teachers have been able to produce 100% pass results.

2. Government teachers discuss the SMART tests with the REWARD teachers.
3. HMs want their schools to do well in SMART tests. They constantly check with REWARD on how their school is doing, and now allocate separate periods for the REWARD teachers to train students to face SMART tests.

(My opinion: Like in the HD Kote Mobile Science Van project, this goes to show that everyone – teachers, HMs, education officials – want their schools to do well. If given goals to work towards, they want and will work towards it; they want their school to shine. They are not as apathetic as they might appear to be. Somehow without external interventions like REWARD trust the motivation to work towards a goal seems non-existent (they either don't have a clear goal and/or think the goal cannot be achieved). Passing SSLC is a universal goal, but they think they cannot achieve that goal. But with REWARD's intervention they are energized to achieve goals, including the goal of all their students passing SSLC. This type of change in attitude can create a fundamental shift in the system, and this is the key element that has to be replicated in other areas – changing the attitude of teachers, HMs, and educational officials. The teachers, HMs, and educational officials, are all so directly connected to the schools, they should WANT to do their job well. Achieving this is a big step.

Also note that healthy competition is good – when one teacher (REWARD teacher) does well, others want to do well also. Action item for Asha: We should track the schools where this has happened, and understand more details which we can replicate in other areas.

4. Kalkulum Middle School has won the award of “best school in the block” with a cash prize of Rs. 25000 from the government, and has won two National Merit Cum Means Scholarships for 2+ students for the last 3 years. This is attributed to Teacher Kannan conducting special classes.
5. Kariachery Primary School was judged the best school in the block and has won a Rs. 5000 cash award.
6. REWARD teachers who work with younger classes: All government school teachers for young children get ABL training, and they insist that REWARD teachers should get ABL training also. So the REWARD teachers attend that training. The challenge to do anything beyond that is time. During the monthly meeting the REWARD trustees pick a teacher and ask them to take a class (which they took that week in the school). The trustees and the other co-teachers comment on the content and the methodologies to improve the presentation. They ask the teachers to bring the teaching aids they used in the class for that particular class. As much as possible REWARD trustees use the time when they visit younger classes to work with the children and the teacher.

Recommendations for Asha

1. I feel Asha should continue supporting REWARD. One, it is important to support government school students wherever possible. The poorest children and a large number of

girls attend these schools, in addition every country needs a robust and strong government school system. Two, the REWARD team is very committed. Three, the project has seen tangible success. We should also explore ways to improve the quality of education even further as explained above.

2. Asha is REWARD's biggest supporter. It is currently funded by multiple chapters, the entire amount is too large for one typical Asha chapter. Asha should put together a plan to ensure that they know about the funding for the next academic year by June 1. It is tough for REWARD when the funding decisions are distributed across chapters with different timelines, and throughout the year they are not sure whether their budget will be covered for that year. We should put our heads together and see how we can address this. They have enough to worry about without worrying about whether they will get next year's funding.

3. Asha chapters supporting this project should have regular conversations with each other and see how they can help improve the quality of education even further.

4. We should think of this as a project improving quality of education, and less as a project that addresses severe teacher shortages. So that we can address challenges accordingly.