

Site visit report by Subashree Rajagopal, Asha volunteer

Of REWARD Trust, Chennai March 7 2018

I have had regular visits with the government schools supported by Reward Trust since they started their collaboration with Asha and have been able to chronicle and observe the changes that have occurred over time in each school. In this visit I visited Kumarapakkam Government Middle School and Thirukazhukundram North Government Middle school.

Thirukazhukundram North Middle school is remarkable for a couple of reasons. There is a significant population of children from the Irular community (a historically underprivileged community with a scheduled caste / scheduled tribes designation).

The second reason that the Thirukazhukundram school was remarkable was because we visited the 3rd grade classroom, run by a **government** teacher. In other words, Reward Trust did not appoint a teacher for this class. Hence this proved to be a way of observing a class run by a government school teacher, in a government school which has received some outside volunteer support. Ms.Muniyammal was welcoming and warm and allowed us to take over her class hour and interact freely with the students. It was the hour before lunch.

I opened a book and faced it towards the children. It was a book by Mo and Willems, simple, funny easy to read book with comical illustrations featuring an Elephant and a "Piggie" as the central characters. The book was in English and the sentences ranged from a couple of words long – from "Piggie!!LOOKKKK!!!" to "Piggie looked behind - and what did he SEEE!?" The book is meant for kindergardeners in a typical English medium school. Children volunteered enthusiastically – one to be "Elephant", one to be "Piggie". They looked at the page and read out their part, as loud as they could, as best as they could, as clearly as they could, all the while collapsing into giggles. There was jostling and giggling and scurrying as children scrambled to come to the front to get their turn. Child after child scrambled up front finishing each others sentences. One child was struck with stage fright and gulped nervously before he could repeat what I said. I knelt down to his level and repeated it. He gulped again and said it. Loud. I gave him a hug. Children yelled out the sentences they could read. It was now way past lunch.

It was remarkable that most of the class participated, so enthusiastically, in a book reading and acting activity in English. I am typically used to seeing very quiet, silent students, all looking mesmerized at a speaker. This was a highly engaged class and the enthusiasm was high. All credit to Ms. Muniyammal.

Kumarapakkam middle school was a very interesting experience. We witnessed a debate between 2 sets of middle school students on the use of plastics. The students were articulate, fluent and very well prepared. They were dramatic in their presentations, ending their points with a rhyme or a song. It was clear that they had command over language and good public speaking skills. It was also clear that their teacher had invested a lot of effort in training them and took great pride in seeing them perform well.

Over the years, I am seeing vast improvements in school infrastructure, all done by the government. Private corporations are also contributing towards the physical infrastructure of the schools. One of the schools we visited had its walls painted in bright child friendly colors with murals of butterflies and engaging slogans. Another school had a reverse osmosis plant installed for clean drinking water.

However, there is still a gap when it comes to teachers, and the appointing of well trained teachers. There is still a gap when it comes to quality of education and a completely overlooked gap when it comes to serving special needs children within the classroom. There is no support for handling children of different abilities.

REWARD Trust appoints teachers with Asha support, ensuring that no class runs empty without a teacher or runs too full. They add a teacher whenever there is no teacher available to teach a specific subject – for example they add a teacher to teach Class XII Math or Class X Science. Recently the REWARD trustees took turns teaching Math to Class XII students for a whole year till the time a Math teacher became available.

Reward Trust has also systematically trained its teachers on content, delivery, educational aids and regularly assesses teacher performance using highly fine tuned metrics that include student performance in the high school graduation exams.

Overall, it is always very satisfying to be able to peek into the government school system and see children from a cross section of society participating in a uniquely democratic experience – experiencing education as their right enshrined in the constitution. It is always very satisfying to see committed government employees – principals, teachers and staff having such demonstrable pride in their school and actively engaging with a volunteer citizen community for the betterment of their school. It is always humbling to be a part of this experience.