

Doorstep School, Pune – site visit report January 2011

Two tiny heads peered from behind the door of a makeshift tin shed as I stepped out of the rickshaw for a site visit to the Doorstep School. This school was erected just next to the labor camp for the Simplicity township construction site for the children of the laborers. I was accompanied by member of DSS, Ms. Varsha Jadhav who explained to me the working of DSS. DSS has about 90 branches at construction sites all over Pune. They open schools at construction sites as they come up, subject to availability of funds, teachers and access. Sometimes the builders cooperate in this endeavor and build the tin sheds to hold the school but mostly DSS has to do it themselves. Schools in the same area are looked over by a co-coordinator and each school has at least two teachers and a caretaker for the daycare centre.

I visited schools in two labor camps close to each other in the Hadapsar area - Simplicity and Greencity. At Simplicity, I met the coordinator who was in charge of both these schools. There were also two teachers - one for the children between 3-6 years and one for the children aged 6-12 years. In addition to a school, there was a daycare for children younger than 3 years with a caretaker and a quiet corner with hanging jholas for naptime. Children between the age group 3-6 have several activities such as story time, song time and learn to recognize colors, fruits, birds etc with the help of homemade teaching aids. I was assured that all children are taught basic hygiene and healthy living. The older children have an activity resource centre where they are taught different subjects like science, math, history etc. to prepare them to go to nearby municipal schools. If they are unable to join the municipal schools, they study at DSS and take the exams for the appropriate class externally. Some children above age 12 do attend municipal schools. DSS arranges for the transport to bring these children to the school and back. Older children generally are made to join their parents at the construction site and hence there are very few students above the age of 14 years at any DSS. Each child has a report card where the teachers note down the progress of the child and notebooks for writing their assignments. The workings of the school at Greencity labor camp were similar.

A typical day for a DSS teacher begins by going into the labor camp and bringing the children to the school. Sometimes the children have to be washed, given clean clothes to wear and food to eat after coming to school. Since the laborers come from varied backgrounds, parents are often reluctant to send the children to school due to cultural and language differences. So the teachers have to convince the parents to send their children to school. Once in school, the teachers take care of the tutoring and overall development of the children. They have a timetable for lessons, playtime and activity time. But the laborers are at one construction site for a maximum of one year after which they have to move to the next site where there may not necessarily be a school. In such cases, the parents get the child's progress report card which they can show the teachers at the school at the next construction site. They are also given mobile numbers of the DSS members so that they can contact them in case they have any questions or problems with the enrolment of their child in the next school. But following up on this becomes difficult for DSS if the parents do not keep in touch, which in majority of the cases they do not.

I feel that the initiative is noble, the efforts are enormous and the dedication is indisputable however I couldn't help feeling a bit unsettled as I left the two schools. It would require a lot more effort on the part of DSS (or any such organization undertaking this Herculean task) and especially the parents to make this system more beneficial for the children and sustainable. But I would like to end on a positive note - Doorstep school is an important step towards making people (of a particular economic background) realize the benefits of education and its significance in improving the quality of their life. So, even if few children get the opportunity to learn and make a better life for themselves through DSS, it's all well worth the effort.

Aditi.