

Door Step School (Pune, India)

Asha for Education site visit report

Date of site visit: Monday, 25 June 2018.

Visit by Adwait Mane (mane.adwait@gmail.com) from Asha Atlanta chapter.

[Door Step School website](#), [Asha project webpage](#)

Introduction

Door Step School (DSS), started in 1989 in Mumbai (and later expanded to Pune) and runs various programs to support the primary education of underprivileged communities, especially the children of migrant construction workers. Despite a widespread infrastructure of formal education, a large number of children in these cities were found to be out of school. DSS has addressed this problem by bringing education to the doorstep of these children. This [seven minute video provides a good overview of DSS](#). The Seattle chapter of Asha for Education supports two Education Activity Centres (EACs). The Silicon Valley and St. Louis chapters also support DSS Pune.

Some of DSS' projects are:

- Project Foundation: DSS has set up Education Activity Centres (EACs) at the construction sites for children aged 0-14 years. In 2017-18, there were 112 EACs with 8464 students.
 - Literacy classes: these are for children between 6-14 years of age who are not formally enrolled to schools for various reasons. DSS aims to enroll the children within 6 weeks of their coming to the EAC.
 - Study classes: the child moves to the study class once enrolled in school. These classes are designed to assist the students in their homework and promote regular study.
 - Balwadi (pre-primary): this is for 3-6 year old children to prepare them for going to school.
 - Creche: this is run for children between 0-3 years. Taking care of the younger siblings (infants and toddlers) has become a critical activity for DSS so that the older children may attend school.
- Grow with Books: this program happens at school after school finishes. 90 minute sessions are held weekly in schools for 2nd to 4th standard students to improve their reading, writing, and speaking skills.
- Parivartan: this is the teacher training center. New teachers are trained here since they usually don't have a college degree. Refresher training for experienced teachers and management staff is also conducted here.

DSS has more community and school based programs. The [handout](#) provides a brief description and the [annual report](#) provides more details. DSS uses a project based teaching curriculum. Every month there is a theme such as seasons, fruits, animals etc. DSS teachers have developed a plethora of teaching aids to keep the students engaged.

Summary:

- DSS has an effective teacher training program that benefits the students and the teachers. The teachers are happy and proud to work for DSS.
- DSS uses a multitude of teaching aids to keep the students engaged. The students enjoy the project based teaching.
- DSS has an effective teaching curriculum and methodology for out-of-state students to adapt to Marathi as the language of instruction in school.
- DSS works with the developer/contractor of the construction site to get better infrastructure and support for the cause. The contractor is required by law to support 30% of the EAC.
- CSR is good, but companies new to CSR are impatient for results.

DSS keeps detailed records of the students' progress which is entered into a software database at the main office. Since the families often migrate to other construction sites, identity cards (Figure 1) ensure a seamless transition for the students.

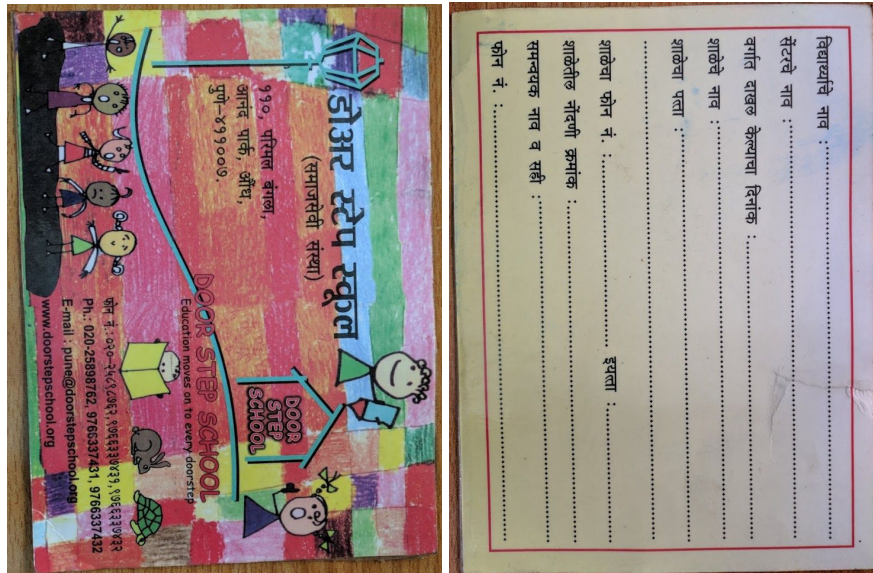


Figure 1: An identity card is used to associate the student with his/her track record. If the student moves to another DSS site, there is a seamless transition.

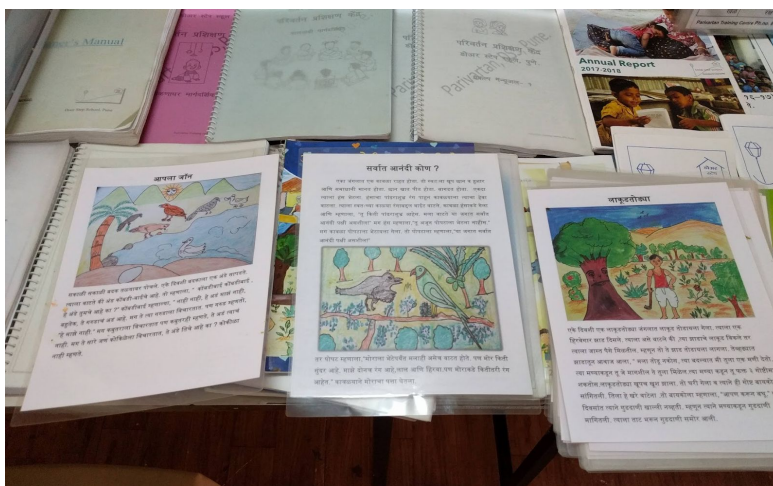


Figure 2: Innovative teaching methods displayed at the DSS office. These stories are written and illustrated by DSS students. They are used as reading material during lessons. The author's name is written on the back.

Parivartan teacher training center

I met Mrs. Bhavana Kulkarni, the director of DSS Pune, at 10 am at the Parivartan teacher training center at Annabhau Sathe municipal school (RB Kumthekar Road, Sadashiv Peth). DSS recruits teachers for the EACs and Grow with Books from the local community which allows the teachers to easily connect with the students. Most of the teachers have only studied till 10th or 12th grade, so teacher training is an important mechanism for ensuring good quality teaching. The teachers are taught basic teaching skills (how to conduct lessons, keep the students engaged, maintain discipline, be aware of different learning styles etc.). The training sessions happen on weekends at the municipal school. Using the school allows DSS to use well maintained classrooms without spending on renting space.

While the primary focus of DSS is the students, it benefits the teachers as well. DSS conducted a survey in which the teachers were asked to describe how DSS has impacted their lives. Some of the responses are below:

“I recently lost my husband and suddenly realized how lonely my son and I were in this world. None of my relatives were interested in my well-being and nobody offered any support. I also realized that I had to be bold and step out of the house and find a job so that we could live a decent life. I took up a job with DSS as a teacher and this has been the best thing that has happened to me. I am learning about the many opportunities there are in this world. I have to work hard without being afraid and I will be able to live an independent life.” (courage, determination, increase in self-worth and self-confidence)

“I have been married for the last 12 years but my husband has started talking and sharing his ideas with me only in the last one year. Earlier he spoke only with his mother and ignored me

completely. But now there is a positive change: he listens to what I have to say and acts accordingly; he also bought me a saree for the first time!” (communication skills, respect for the wife, inclusion in decision making)

The positive impact of DSS has motivated some teachers to get college degrees.



Figure 3: Teacher training in session.

Grow with Books after-school reading program

At around 11:30 am, we went to the municipal school in the Pune University campus (Figure 4) to see the after-school reading program. This is one of the better quality municipal schools since it's in a good part of the city. We walked through the school playground to one of the classrooms which had three DSS teachers, one school teacher and 37 primary school students. This is a better teacher to student ratio than in school, where there is only one teacher. Some of the students were sitting on the floor towards the front of the classroom (Figure 5). There was a lot of activity and chatter in the room. The students were working on a writing assignment and the teachers were walking around inspecting the students.

Videos: [students listing words with 'क'](#), [students reciting a poem](#)

I talked to the cluster coordinator Chhaya tai (Figure 7) about her role and her experience with DSS. She had joined DSS more than a decade ago as a book fairy (teacher for the Grow with Books program). She found her job engaging and rewarding. Over the years she was given more responsibility. She first became a supervisor and now she is a cluster coordinator. She was very excited to educate me about DSS. She told me about the planned activities for that day - a song, a story, and a language game - and proudly showed the teaching aids developed by her colleagues. The teachers were actively engaged in these activities with the students and the students were enjoying themselves.

I got the impression that DSS has a mature system of monitoring and feedback for the large network of locations they operate. Chhaya tai said she acquired a lot of professional skills about effective teaching, teamwork and communication through her work along with life skills such as riding a two-wheeler (as coordinator she has to travel to multiple locations). The other teachers had similar positive thoughts about DSS. From my brief conversations, I felt that the teachers are happy with the work, which leads to a better learning experience for the students.



Figure 4: Entrance to the municipal school (left) and school playground (right) with my host Bhavana tai.



Figure 5: Students learning the alphabet using the study aids with assistance from the supervisor (in red). They need to match the cutouts to the chart.

aids. The balwadi students were doing craft work and the literacy class students were doing Marathi writing exercises.



Figure 9: Construction site in Baner (left). Beyond the green barrier is the accommodation for the construction workers along with the Doorstep School EAC. Right: Living quarters of the construction workers and the DSS students.



Figure 10: Exterior of EAC.



Figure 11: Children greeting us as we enter. The literacy class students are to the left, the balwadi students are at the front right and the creche students are at the back right.



Figure 12: This classroom is equipped with a cooler and fans (left). Over time, the contractor (Millenium) has developed a supportive attitude towards DSS and has provided these facilities in most of its construction sites. Right: 0-3 year old kids in the creche.



Figure 13: Science experiment kit.

Sunila tai and the teachers explained how they track the students' progress (Figures 14). DSS is meticulous in tracking students which enables them to identify problem areas and assist students facing difficulties. A common issue is that students come from a different state where they have been educated in a language other than Marathi. According to the Right to Education Act, students have to be admitted to the grade corresponding to their age. These students struggle in government schools since the language of instruction is Marathi. DSS has a 12 week program to teach these students basic Marathi in the Literacy Class. Once they are able to cope with the lessons in school, they move to the Study Class. Usually, the students are able to fully adapt to Marathi instruction within 6 months.

I met Prakash who is one such student. His family had migrated from Navgaon in Chattisgarh a few weeks earlier. He is able to attend the EAC because he can bring his younger sibling to the creche. He said he liked his school in Navgaon and he will enroll in 6th standard when the academic year starts. However, previously his medium of instruction was Hindi so he won't be able to follow the Marathi lessons in school. Therefore he is currently attending the Literacy Class to learn Marathi.

Left Page (Individual Students):

क्र.	व्यक्तिगत कौशल	बौद्धिक कौशल	भाषिक कौशल	शारीरिक कौशल
1	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
2	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
3	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
4	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
5	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे

Right Page (Groups):

क्र.	गट	कलात्मक कौशल	बौद्धिक कौशल	भाषिक कौशल	शारीरिक कौशल
1	गट	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
2	गट	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
3	गट	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
4	गट	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे
5	गट	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे	गोड गोड बनवणे

Figure 14.

Left: This notebook tracks modules completed by individual students (ages 3-6). The column headings are categories such as crafts / motor skills, intellectual skills, speech, math, science. One of the craft activities was making small balls of paper.

Right: This sheet tracks modules completed by groups of students (ages 6-14). Row labels are groups ('gut' is group in Marathi).

As we were leaving the EAC, the students graciously thanked us and one of the students gave me a beautiful flower as a token of appreciation. I was touched by this gesture and further motivated to support DSS.



Figure 15: token of appreciation from the students.

Support from the developer/contractor

The developer/contractor at the Baner construction site is supportive of DSS and has provided some much needed basic infrastructure (Figure 12) at all of its sites. The contractor is required by law to support 30% of the cost of the EAC. Contractors that have been working with DSS for a long time are sometimes proactive. Bhavana tai had earlier told me about another construction site where the supervisor came from an underprivileged background and had attended an institution similar to DSS during his childhood. Having personally benefited from such an institution, he championed the cause and convinced his superiors at the contracting agency to provide more than the minimum 30% of financial support. However, this is an exception. Contractors rarely contribute more than the minimum. Not all EACs are as fortunate. Many do not have fans which causes a lot of discomfort during the oppressive summer heat. Many contractors are not motivated to even meet the minimum requirement and consider it a low priority.

DSS continues to engage with the contractors to enlist their support. Sunila tai told me about a situation in which DSS' efforts provided a tangible benefit to the contractor. The contractors employ many women to manually transport construction materials like sand and stones. Earlier the contractors did not allow breastfeeding mothers to take breaks to feed their infant children as it reduced productivity. After DSS lobbied for scheduled feeding breaks, many of the contractors allowed the breaks and found that it improved the women's productivity. If the child was fed on time during the day, he/she slept better at night and so did the mother which made the mothers more productive during the day. Such measures improve employee satisfaction which provides mutual benefits to the construction workers, their children, and the contractor.

Strategic challenges

Prior to my visit, I only had a basic understanding of the overall landscape of social ventures and (non-governmental organizations) NGOs in India. Through my conversations with the staff I learned about some of strategic challenges faced by NGOs. In 2014, India took a big step towards more funding for NGOs by becoming first country in the world to enshrine corporate giving into law. Businesses with annual revenues of more than INR 10 billion (USD 146 million) must give away 2% of their net profit to charity as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending. Greater philanthropic giving is certainly positive but the DSS staff said that companies that are new to CSR are often impatient. They expect success stories within a few months, but it takes at least three years to see sustainable change in a community. Moreover, they use third party auditors which is often a waste of money according to the DSS staff since auditing is a business, not a social venture. Some of the funding partners like Wipro and Infosys have a tradition of philanthropy since long before the CSR law. They have a more patient and mature approach, and new companies would be more effective if they followed suit.

Another challenge is recruiting talented employees. Associate Director Asma Tamboli said that DSS has abundant data about student attendance and progress. They have been trying to recruit a data analyst but can only offer salaries that are about a third of the salaries offered by for-profit companies. They also want to hire someone to improve their social media presence for better outreach since the current team doesn't have the bandwidth to do more work. New graduates with degrees in social work often prefer to work for corporate trusts that have emerged since the CSR law since they are more lucrative. But often corporate trusts don't do grassroots level work that is as impactful. It seemed to me that the leadership staff choose to work at DSS despite more lucrative opportunities elsewhere simply out of dedication for the cause.

Conclusion

DSS is a mature organization that is effectively addressing the unique challenges in education of children of migrant construction workers. They have good systems in place for teaching, monitoring, and teacher training, and they are eager to apply their successful model to other cities in India. I wholeheartedly recommend Asha for Education to continue to support DSS. I have only scratched surface of this societal challenge and how DSS is tackling it, and I hope to learn more about it moving forward.



Figure 16. (left to right) Bhavana Kulkarni, me, Sunila Page, Asma Tamboli.

