

I visited two schools run by Door Step School (DSS) at different construction sites in Hadapsar, Pune on behalf of Asha, Munich. My general impressions about the visit are as follows.

The DSS initiative is a unique concept targeting a neglected section of the society. They attempt to introduce the children of migrant construction labourers to basic literacy (Marathi alphabet or 'akshar olakh' and counting, simple addition, etc) and integrate them into mainstream schools. Thus, their vision seems to be in line with Asha's overall aims.

The sites of the schools are basic and frugal (just a tin shed) in keeping with their temporary nature. The school has the basic teaching aids like black boards, slates, pencils, charts, craft material, etc. The students are children of migrant workers who have very limited exposure to education. The children are rounded up from the sites by the teachers every morning and are brought to school. Most of the children are first generation learners, the parents being largely illiterate. Some of the children at both the sites that I visited had attended schools at their respective native places but are unable to pursue formal education due to the itinerant nature of their parents' work. There were about 10 – 15 children of the age group of 4 – 10 yrs at each site. The older group of children had been sent to the municipal school in the area. DSS also provides pick-up and drop facility for the children going to mainstream schools. Maximum age of children coming to the DSS schools is about 14, though older children are given individual guidance and help if they approach DSS teachers / volunteers. The number of children at each site fluctuates almost every week as workers of various types come and go at the construction site. The average number of children of all age-groups at one site is about 25 at a given time. The schools appeared to have the amenities that they have claimed in their Project Proposal Form (teaching aids, drinking water, etc) except for toilets. The DSS representative claimed that mobile toilets were present but were a bit far away. The volunteers were reluctant to actually show me the toilet and I am unsure whether to give them the benefit of doubt. Apart from this, the staff seemed committed and enthusiastic. The teacher: student ration was high and DSS mentioned that at least two teachers are present per site, keeping in mind the security of the teachers at the construction site. DSS also has a network of 'supervisors' who co-ordinate the sites in one region. However, the teachers, though enthusiastic, are not very well-educated themselves (but educated enough to teach the children). Most of the teachers are college students working part time as DSS teachers to support their families or their own education.

The DSS also arranges picnics to parks or visits to public places like fire-station or zoo for the children who would otherwise not get the opportunity to visit such places. Such outings are arranged once every few months. Another appreciable initiative of DSS is to run a sort of crèche for very young children (about 0-4 yrs). Many of the children of school going age are not able to attend school as they have to take care of their younger siblings while the parents work. By taking over this responsibility, DSS ensures that the older children are free to attend school.

A large amount of DSS money goes towards payment of salary and travel expenses for the teachers. This seems rather unfortunate, but DSS claim that finding such a large number of volunteers who will be committed and regular, is difficult. DSS representatives assured me that the funds provided by Asha, Munich would be utilised only as per the budget-heads specified by Asha and detailed accounts would be provided to Asha. The site at which the funds will be utilised may change depending upon the construction site in progress at the time when the actual money comes through but all the details of the site will be supplied in the fund utilisation statement.

The main underlying factor in the operation of DSS is its temporary nature. The children are able to attend school (DSS or mainstream) for 4-5 months at the most (usually lesser) before the parents move to a new site. As a result, substantial progress in learning is not possible. Hence, it is improper to apply the standard norms in evaluation of this school. It would be unfair to judge DSS or its students with the same yardstick that is used for a normal school with 'permanent' students. Once the child moves on, it is difficult to track the progress of the child. DSS takes some measure like providing the child with a birth certificate (which can make it easier for him/her to enrol in a proper school in future) or giving the child a notebook noting the levels of his reading / numerical skills which s/he can show at his new school. DSS also gives the children contact numbers which can be used to get in touch with volunteers for any queries after the child has moved away. Despite this, once the child moves out of purview of DSS, it is very difficult to follow-up on his / her progress. Though I realise that it is tough enough to convince the parents to even send their wards to DSS schools, I personally feel that DSS could engage the parents more and make them realise the importance of educating their children. Establishing some sort of contact with the 'mukadams' or middle men who are essentially responsible for the movements of labourers on sites, may be of some help.

Another area that I feel could be worked on is 'social' education. DSS focuses on basic literacy and numerical skills. These are no doubt important, however, given the very short duration for which the children attend the school, a good dose of practical knowledge about sanitation, health and hygiene, family planning, **moral values** and the importance of education could be useful, especially for slightly older children. Though DSS has mentioned social education in their Project Proposal form, I did not see a particular emphasis on this during the site visit.

I would suggest that Asha, Munich could ask DSS to address some of the issues that you feel are important when you provide the funds. I would recommend follow up of the child's continued schooling and social education as main areas of importance.

If Asha, Munich expects some concrete or tractable results (like substantial number of children completing their schooling, etc), then I feel that DSS may not be able to meet their expectations. However, I strongly feel that initiatives like DSS should be encouraged as they open a window of opportunity for children who would otherwise be deprived of the basic right to education. Some or even very little education is better than no education at all and organisations like DSS may eventually result in creating awareness in this section of society.

If you have any further queries in this regard or if I have missed some point, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Regards,

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