

Doorstep School Pune – Site Visit Report

by

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Background

Doorstep School ([DSS](#)) is an NGO that has been working on spreading basic education in Pune and Mumbai for approximately the last 15 years, and runs non-formal education centers, balwadis, after school programs, library programs and a school-on-wheels program. It has a number of centers in Pune – mainly in the western parts of the city (Pashan, Ganeshkhind, near Karve Rd., etc.). On 30th Nov 2005 I visited about 5 centers. The entire visit lasted from approx. 10am to approx. 4pm. My very helpful and informative guide throughout the day was Mrs. Rajni Paranjpe (Rajnitai), the moving spirit behind DSS in Pune. Also accompanying us for the first 2 hours or so was Malati Gadgil, an Asha-SV volunteer who has been involved with DSS for a number of years. The visit was pre-arranged, but there is no reason to believe that anything would have been different had it been a surprise visit except that I probably would not have been able to claim so much of Rajnitai's time from her busy schedule. There were some minor language hurdles, but definitely not a language barrier. I am able to understand (but not speak) normal day-to-day Marathi reasonably well. With Marathi, Hindi and English explanations by Rajnitai, my communication with the Doorstep teachers and kids was fine – though perhaps a shade less than free-flowing. The visit started and ended at the DSS office in Anand Park, Aundh. We visited Doorstep centers in DRDO (Pashan), Shivaji Housing Society, Dattawadi and Range Hills.

DRDO Pashan Center

Our first visit was to a balwadi located in a construction worker's colony near the DRDO Pashan complex (See Fig. 1). There we met one of Doorstep's teachers. There were only 3 or 4 kids at the center that day. The teacher told us that since it was the last day of the month the nearby Corporation school let off early in the morning and that was one cause for the low attendance that day. Another cause was that the other teacher in that school was away on a government training program.



Figure 1. DSS Balwadi at DRDO Pashan

It appears that if an organization gets govt. funding under the Mahatma Phule education scheme (which DSS does), they have to send their teachers for a govt. training program twice a year for 10 days each.

Shivaji Housing Society and Vicinity Centers

From DRDO Pashan we went to the DSS centre located at the Shivaji Housing Society (off Senapati Bapat Road). The main center is located in a residential building (a bungalow). Inside, in different rooms, I saw a room where an after-school program is conducted, a room where a NFE class was operating for street kids who live in the vicinity of the Chatursinghi temple (Fig. 2), and another room where study classes are conducted (Fig. 3). I also visited 2 other DSS centers nearby – one in shed in a construction workers' colony (Fig. 4) and one in a corner of an under-construction building (Fig.5). I was shown around by Sarika, and various teachers gave explanations.



Figure 2. NFE for Street Kids at Shivaji Hsg



Figure 3. Study Class at Shivaji Hsg Society



Figure 4. NFE in a Shed



Figure 5. NFE in Under-Construction Bldg.

Here are some observations and points from my visit to the centers in and around Shivaji Housing Society.

- (i) The study center had only about 3 kids when I visited (around 11am). I was told that it is full in the evenings. The center appeared impressive. I noticed numerous books, maps, etc. I was told about their “guest lecture” program, where they have professionals coming and instructing the kids on various subjects – including a British lady coming to teach English. The study center activities also include taking kids to a science lab where they are encouraged to experiment.
- (ii) There are some unique problems faced by the NFE classes (Fig.2) for Chatursinghi street kids (compared to say construction worker kids). Simply getting these kids to spend some time sitting in a room has been a challenge. Another challenge has been to inculcate in these kids a sense of basic personal hygiene.
- (iii) I was shown a number of teaching aids – many developed by DSS teachers themselves. One is shown in Fig. 3. It is obvious that much thought and effort has gone into preparing teaching aids. For instance the Devnagari letter व (ba) differs from the letter वा (va) only by one cross stroke. When kids – all of whom are first generation learners – are being taught to recognize alphabets, they often find it difficult to recognize such subtle differences. In order to overcome this, teaching aids have been developed with pictures of human faces with subtle differences in their features. This helps kids learn how to recognize subtle differences. One common teaching aid in DSS schools uses jigsaw puzzle principles to teach how to build words from individual letters.
- (iv) The NFE class which was being conducted in a corner of an under-construction building (Fig. 5) was in its first day of operation that day. Normal – and very loud - construction activity (stone breaking, concrete mixers, etc) was going on in close proximity. Some little girls there had even tinier siblings with them, the mother no doubt busy constructing the building. Not an ideal learning environment. But I was told that DSS considered it very lucky that the builder had allowed the NFE center to operate. Most kids in similar circumstances would never get an opportunity to get even a semblance of basic education.
- (v) The kids here – especially the Chatursinghi street kids (Fig. 2) – were very excited to get their pictures taken by me.

Dattawadi Center

From the DSS center at Shivaji Housing Society we moved on to the DSS Dattawadi Center. The Dattawadi center is a fairly large after-school study center. It is housed in a housing society’s community center. I was told that when that room is full study center sessions are also held outdoors in the same compound under a rudimentary shelter. This center has a number of computers, which are used for teaching kids and also for DSS record keeping. Kids who come to this center study in the local Corporation school. The Corporation school conducts classes for girls in the morning and for boys in the afternoon. Correspondingly boys come to the study center in the mornings, while girls come there in the afternoons. See Figs. 6 and 7. One of the teachers – Leena Satav – showed me around. She showed me several teaching aids, some of

which I had already seen at the Shivaji Housing Society center. She also showed me some of the software that she uses to keep records for each kid in entire DSS system in Pune. Details such as level of education, attendance record, reason for absence, etc. for each and every kid are recorded in a spreadsheet. Each DSS center collects this data and sends it to the Dattawadi center where Leena Satav uses this raw data to populate the DSS-wide database. Very professional!



Figure 6. Dattawadi Center Morning (Boys)



Figure 7. Dattawadi Center Afternoon (Girls)

DSS has a library program which takes books to various Corporation schools for an hour or two every day, sort of temporary libraries for the Corporation school kids. The day I was visiting, a meeting was going on at the Dattawadi center (in an upstairs room) for all DSS library personnel. Some of them came downstairs and acquainted me with the library program and showed me some of the books.

When we arrived at the Dattawadi study center the morning session for boys was just about wrapping up. It was time for the boys to go to the Corporation school. I asked if I could go see the Corporation school. So accompanied by 2 DSS teachers – one a former teacher at the Corporation school – I visited the Corporation school about half a mile away. There I recognized some of the boys whom I had seen a little while back at the DSS study center.

Back at the Dattawadi center Rajnitai and I had a very satisfying lunch with all the teachers and the library personnel. Special lunch (and mineral water) had been procured for Rajnitai and me.

After lunch – by which time girls had started arriving for the afternoon session at the study center – we set out for the Range Hills DSS center after a short stop to see a DSS center in Paanwadi that does not operate at that time of the day.

Range Hills Center

This is a non-formal education center for kids who live in a vegetable sellers' jhopdi (Figs. 8 and 9). We met Vidya Ghugri here. The kids were very enthusiastic and wanted to show us what they were studying. Again they were fascinated by my camera. They posed for the camera (Fig. 10),

and also insisted that I photograph what they had been studying (Fig. 11). They were very excited to see their photos on my digital camera's LCD screen.



Figure 8. Range Hills Center



Figure 9. Inside Range Hills Center



Figure 10. Posing for the Camera



Figure 11. Kids Showing Off Teaching Aids

Wrap-Up

Joined by Vidya Ghugri, we headed back to the DSS office in Anand Park, Aundh. The School-on-Wheels bus was parked outside the office, and I went inside the bus and took a look though there weren't any kids there at that time.

Vidya Ghugri plays a very important role in DSS as she plays a part in designing the curriculum and advising DSS teachers on appropriate teaching techniques. She showed me some of the material she had prepared. Rajnitai then showed me a report on DSS prepared by a French lady affiliated to a French organization that funds DSS. This person had spent a number of weeks in Pune studying DSS. Rajnitai said that such reports are very useful because not only do they give very detailed information about DSS to the funding organization but DSS also learns from them.

Final Impressions and Some Observations

1. I was very impressed by DSS. They seem to be doing a very good job in a most efficient manner.
2. It seems one of the major problems that DSS faces is the difficulty in getting places (even very basic shacks) in construction sites in which they can conduct classes. Some major builders have promised help at upper management levels. However this does not necessarily translate into help from the builder's people on the ground in the construction sites.
3. There is also the obvious problem of irregular attendance and dropouts. Even in a well-established and well-equipped center such as the Dattawadi study center, the teachers told me that they had to sometimes go out into the community and urge kids to come to the center (and urge parent to send them). Given the socio-economic situation of the communities in which DSS operates this problem is not likely to ever be completely solved. All DSS can do is to change attitudes towards education little by little.
4. All DSS staff members in Pune are female. I asked Rajnitai why this is the case. She said that with the salary they give it is almost impossible to attract male teachers. She said that it would be wonderful to have a few males on the staff – DSS Mumbai had some. It would allow DSS Pune to do certain things which it cannot now. For example DSS would like to keep the Shivaji Housing Society center open for longer hours in the evening, but cannot do so without any males on its staff.
5. Rajnitai – talking on a somewhat philosophical level – said that she does not see fundamental change happening in the lives of DSS kids in the immediate future. She sees DSS's role as introducing people – communities, families – to the idea of education, making them aware that education can be a positive force in their lives. She believes that it will take at least a generation for this idea of education to sink in and establish itself in such a manner as to make fundamental changes in the lives of these communities.
6. It looks to me that Asha's site visit mechanism leaves much to be desired. Depending largely on Asha volunteers based in the U.S. to conduct site visits during their rare India trips that are often short and busy may not necessarily be adequate to judge projects, given their scale and reach. In the long term we may want to think of alternative mechanisms so that site visits happen in a more professional manner. For instance, would it make sense to provide a summer internship to a grad student who may be studying for a Master's in Social Work in India to go and study some of our projects ?