

Project Why
Location: New Delhi
Site Visit Report
25th – 3rd Oct 2008
Megha

Project Overview:

Project Why (pwhy) runs a number of centres that provide after school education for children from slums. They also have creches, a centre for disabled children and adults, and a women's centre. We supported about 40% their budget in FY 2007-2008. They have recently begun an initiative, Planet Why to generate income that could be used to support the activities of Project Why.

Site Visit

PWHY was started by Mrs Anouradha Bakshi (Anou) in 1998 as an endeavour to return her debt to society. It started with English classes for kids from the Govindpuri slums. In a decade they have grown to 13 different centres reaching out to approximately 600 children in three low income/slum areas of New Delhi. The field coordinators are Ms. Shamika (her daughter) and Ms. Rani (a resident of Govindpuri). Mrs Bakshi is the big picture person and chief fundraiser. Shamika and Rani handle the day to day logistics of pwhy which includes speaking with students, parents, managing teachers and resolving any type of community issue that crops up in their classes. Shamika has trained to work with autistic children and Rani has a degree in nursing. Rani is in fact a product of pwhy, having been one of its first students.

My site visit was spread over a period of one week where I was very cordially taken around the various centres, introduced to teachers and was able to have exhaustive discussions with Anou, Rani, Shamika, Ms Barbara (a visiting volunteer from UK who works with the British civil services) and Mr. Dharmendra (who runs the women's centre).

Visit to centres

Pwhy office is located in **Govindpuri, gali no 3**. A narrow lane leads up to a three story building that the project owns. The ground floor is for mentally and physically challenged children and adults. They are divided into three groups based on the level of their disability. The first floor is a creche for children from 1.5 to 3.5 yrs of age. The disabled children and creche babies are picked up from their homes and dropped off to the centre each morning. The second floor is a primary after school centre and the final landing has an office and small kitchen. Across this building is the foster home and another primary after school centre in a rented accommodation. In **Govindpuri, gali no 1** is another creche where I was treated to nursery rhymes and number recitation. Many kids were absent due to a flu that was making the rounds.

A five minutes ride away is a primary after school centre located in the very heart of the **Govindpuri** slums. A labyrinth of narrow lanes, criss-crossing many homes, kirana shops and recycling businesses leads to a single storey rented accommodation. A gutter along the homes was chock full of unhealthy and smelly sewage. In spite of this I landed into a neat, clean and odor free classroom with children bent over their books and two teachers administrating over 3rd and 4th standard boys. Teacher: student ratios were about 1:10 but this fluctuates with time as the after school program is voluntarily attended by children. I doubt if I would find this classroom without Shamika and Rani seeing as a dizzying circuitous route is needed to reach it!

A ten minutes ride away is the **Okhla** primary after school centre. This centre has an interesting history. Ms. Sophiya, one of the teachers who has been with pwhy for 7 years urged Anou to start a centre in Okhla slums because the Govindpuri centre was too far for the children and could not in fact accommodate more children. After much debate with the community, one room brick building (10' X 20') was built. This structure was repeatedly broken by miscreants from the locality over a period of one year. In Shamika's words - "Saturday we would lock the room and on Monday nothing would remain." Pwhy remained persistent and by focusing on their educational activities they were able to convince the community to embrace the learning centre. Today, outside the room a boundary wall has been erected and children sit out here, under a canopy, since they are too many to be accommodated into the room. The roof leaks, there's a rudimentary toilet since the slum has no plumbing and the kids have to sit through hot summer months under one fan or huddle together in the one room during cold winters. In spite of this the teachers remain resilient and kids look very happy.

Located in the **Sanjay colony slums**, a five minutes ride from Okhla is another primary education centre. Situated on the first floor, this primary centre has three teachers who were busy with their charges when we visited. The door was locked because dogs were using the ground floor as a sleeping area and bothering the children.

The furthest away is the **women's centre** located a twenty-minute ride away from pwhy office, in the **Sarita vihar** village. This centre runs independently solely due the perseverance of Mr Dharmender, the manager of this centre. Dharmenderji has been with pwhy for 8 years and started as a teacher. Realizing his potential and interest in taking on a bigger role Anou has made him sole in charge for the women's centre.

His commitment and passion are evident by the amount of progress he has made in just 8 months since the inception of this centre. It took several months for him to find the right space and convince a landlord to rent it to an NGO. The interior was then re-designed to accommodate a creche, sewing class room, beautician's class room, library, room to house women, a kitchen and, a primary as well as middle level after school program. The after school kids occupy space on the terrace under a canopy bravely withstanding the heat (they have only two coolers so children sit close to it by rotation – another innovation by Dharmenderji). Not only does he run the entire outfit but he's also called on each day to resolve the myriad problems of his students and parents. The after school programs are so successful that he has started a waiting list!

He's also done a remarkable job with the women who stay at the residential centre. Junoon, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder was ably handled each time to calm down. She was in rehab when I visited. Having querulous women is also a problem with the neighbouring community who will not tolerate this type of behaviour making his

negotiation and diplomatic skills all the more valuable. Dharmenderji is grooming the centre to function independently from him by setting up processes that encourages the various teachers to take more initiative and ownership in their endeavours. Dharmenderji will take over the administrative running of planet why and is wholly committed to making it a reality. Meanwhile his thoughtful, humble and intelligent manner have greatly distinguished his contribution to pwhy and I can't think of a better manager for planet why.

The women's centre was also a pilot program to see how pwhy can run a centre far away from the main office as well as one that ran numerous activities. So far the pilot has been successful and the problems they have had to set it up have provided valuable lessons that they can apply to planet why.

At the **Girinagar slums** is another rented accommodation. This is located 10 minutes from the main office. The ground floor contains a computer centre that is open to the public. Internet is available at a nominal rate of Rs. 10 per hour and computer classes are also administered here. The first floor is the domain of Mr Naresh; perhaps, the most beloved of teachers at pwhy. He teaches maths to the senior secondary students and serves as a valuable role model to all his students. There's also a library here. From the last batch a student called Janaki ranked 13th in the Delhi CBSE board exams. There aren't as many senior maths teachers so his role is invaluable. It has been difficult to expand high school after school programs since there are too few maths teachers who can teach in Hindi at that level.

General comments and observations

- ✦ All centres and classrooms are spotlessly clean. Students are responsible for cleaning them after class. The walls are decorated with charts and the children's handicrafts. There's a white board in each centre that is being used as per need – in some they have taken the place of blackboards and in some they are activity boards while in others they have a timetable. It's particularly nice to have these instead of chalkboards because in the crowded small classrooms chalk dust causes discomfort.
- ✦ All teachers (except from women's centre) meet during noon to partake in the daily lunch together. The lunch is provided by pwhy in the terrace of the Govindpuri office. This ritual is very useful as it serves as a forum for the teachers to discuss their problems with Shamika and Rani and between themselves. They exchange stories and solutions. A valuable bonding time has been established.
- ✦ All pwhy's transport is taken care of by three autos that are driven by parents of children that attend the schools. They are full time employees of the NGO and they are indispensable. They cart children from various homes in slums to the creche ensuring that the children come to school and ferry Shamika and Rani to their daily rounds of various centres.
- ✦ An unusual feature of pwhy is that teacher retention is high. Two contributing factors to this are – 1. All teachers are local i.e., they live in or very close to the slums where they teach 2. Teaching provides employment to people who would otherwise have to do manual labour. One example is Ms Sophiya of the okhla centre who belongs to the SC/ST class and was unable to get employment as a teacher although qualified for it. Since pwhy doesn't run schools it can employ

people who don't have teaching degrees but have had an education such as the two brothers Sanjay and Vikki who are lohars (migrants from the blacksmith gypsy community) and lived in a slum that was broken down. They teach the primary classes and if not for pwhy they would not have been able to get good jobs that would use their education. Over all teachers at pwhy are very proud of their work and derive satisfaction from the respect and adoration they receive from the parents and children. Indeed, they are looked upon gratuitously by parents who otherwise, would have treated them with contempt just because of their caste! *There have been exceptions. A few years ago one centre had to be closed because teachers were taking extra tuitions for the children who attended their classes and charged them for the service; essentially they used pwhy for recruitment and space to further their tuition business.*

- ✦ Except for the foster children and staff no child is explicitly provided with lunch. Most children eat their meal at the govt school under the mid day meal scheme. Children who come to the creche bring their own lunch. I was surprised by this, but Shamika gave me the reason – pwhy feels that parents need to take some responsibility towards the care of their children. The 9-5pm creche provides a safe environment for children of families where both parents work and no one can stay behind to take care of the child. Since pwhy takes a nominal Rs 1/ day per family the lunch acts as an alternate reminder to the parents that they too are participants in the child's upbringing and not to take pwhy's role for granted. Of course children who do not bring their lunch are given a portion from the staff lunch.
- ✦ Teachers are keen to learn English. An English teacher from US, Ms. Nina plans to work with them to improve their English as well as their teaching methods to grasp the language. Speaking good English is perhaps the best confidence that we can give these children.
- ✦ The foster home was an inadvertent addition to pwhy. Encouraged by the donor who was to fund planet why these children were taken in as the first batch of entrants to planet why. When the donor quite abruptly pwhy decided that they had given too many dreams to these children to send them back to their homes (if they had any!) and has continued to take care of them. All except the disabled children will be placed in a boarding school next year. Many are older than they appear but were malnourished and with no education when they were brought in. They have been attending a kindergarten and have caught up to Std 1 education. These children would be a good match for the Support-A-Child program. Anou has already identified an appropriate boarding school for them.
- ✦ The boys come to school in the morning and girls in the afternoon because the govt school is open for girls in the morning and boys in the afternoon.
- ✦ Pwhy attempts to provide a little more than after school education; they are very careful not to refer to their centres as tuition centres as they try and provide a holistic and not just academic education. They have sponsored various open heart surgeries.
- ✦ Another nice thing about their processes is that it is very open to change. The organization has a constant influx of volunteers – mostly foreign who spend time here in various capacities. They also interact with other NGOs, most recently with

Praxis that carried out a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, opportunities, threats) on their employees.

Overall impressions

Project Why is a vibrant, dynamic organization that works with flexibility and love in the community that they serve. Their teachers are passionate and committed. It has a flat organizational structure encouraging its teachers to innovate and share their ideas. The strongest fear the teachers have is what happens if Anou passes away.

Although Rani and Shamika are the logistical branches of pwhy it's Anou's unflagging spirit and fundraising effort that keeps pwhy running. Her energy is the strength of her teachers. Anou recognizes this and is trying to work towards a model where all her centres are community owned and run. This might take a while to be realized given that some parents are so overwhelmed that even the nominal Rs 1/ day is out of their reach or sometimes they are unwilling to be equal partners because they want things for free. Rani and Shamika are being encouraged to participate in fundraising activity. So far their small efforts (selling raffles in the community or at a college fest) have been resource intensive and without good returns. India being the land of judging a book by its cover has led them to feel under confident in corporate settings. It's ironic since these two girls are the ones who interact with each child, parent and teacher in pwhy! I'm sure given the right impetus they will soon take a more proactive role in fundraising.

Asha-Seattle currently supports approximately 40% of pwhy's budget FY 2007-08 and I felt our donor money is being appropriately utilized to build a more educated society. I certainly felt our project partner had exceeded their mission statement and will continue to perform well.