

Site visit to Karumbalai, Madurai

By Prof. E. Annamalai, father of Asha-MIT/Boston volunteer, Melli Annamalai

At the request of Melli, I visited Maduai SEED in Karumbalai, Madurai in the forenoon of August 31 and had a conversation for about two hours with Karthik and Mansur, the prime movers of the center and two of its trustees. The students were in school, as it was a Friday.

I discussed specifically the issues in two areas: the prospects of students who did professional courses after plus two. So far about six students have done this. The two professional courses are engineering (BE) and education (BEd). Though these students scored very good marks at the plus 2 exam, the competition is stiff that they are not able to get admission either in top notch colleges (i.e. colleges which where companies come in for campus interviews) or in sought-after courses such as computer science. Nor are they able to get the seats earmarked for the government fixed tuition fee, which is a small fee. They have to pay the higher fee fixed for the management seats in private colleges. (However they do not pay the higher capitation fee, a "donation" to the college). Both engineering students are employed: one (mechanical) in a local company (but his salary could be better) and another (civil) in a construction company in Dubai. The BEd students are yet to find employment. It is common for private institutions to demand a price to offer a teaching position.

Parents now do not have any informed guidance on helping their children with career decisions. They are motivated by the success of some students from the town and from Karumbalai itself (not all of them through SEED, for example one family was helped by the fact that their father has low level government job and had contacts with the senior staff in the office). They see the life style change (Karthik's words) of such students, who by their well-paying jobs enter the middle class in two or three years after college. When their wards do not achieve this, they are disappointed, but are not discouraged.

It is my suggestion to ASHA to create a mechanism to give the students and their parents advice regarding course selection college selection, job selection and to

provide opportunities for contact between these students and their prospective employers.

There are lots of government schemes to support financially the education of the children of poor parents. They include totally free education to the first graduate from a poor family, stipend for girls in college, tuition waiver etc. These are restricted to students admitted into public colleges. Karumbalai students' scores, even though very good relatively speaking, do not get them a seat in these institutions. There is an excessive number of private colleges, who are looking for fee paying students for their survival and students like those from Karumbalai join them. But their job prospects are low.

Opting for ITIs after the tenth standard is not attractive because there are very few such government run institutions with affordable fees and the students from Karumbalai do not get scores competitive enough to get into them. Private ITIs charge heavy fees. Also the ambition to get into the middle class is there, as mentioned above. Parents are not willing to wait for the children of their children to achieve this.

I asked for the reason why the choice of professional courses is not diverse. I specifically asked about courses like one on Animation, which is now introduced for a degree or a diploma in an increasing number of colleges and is also taught in privately run vocational courses. Karthik's answer was that Karumbalai students' creative aptitude and skills are below bar. This was an unexpected answer given the focus on creative activities in the SEED center. May the difference is one of class or rural vs. urban. This problem needs to be looked into.

One vocational course outside the college system that some students from Karumbalai have opted for is tourism management. This however needs better communication skills, which Karumbalai students need to sharpen.

The second area of issue that I discussed was the issue of students who are severely lagging behind in their studies compared to what they should be at their grade level. It is a major problem in the city corporation schools in Karumbalai that a majority of them read below their grade level. This has a cascading effect in

other subjects. Karthik takes special classes in these schools for these students in Tamil and Maths. He does not feel competent in doing this for English and Science SEED gives additional coaching in its evening classes. But these do not seem to be enough. There are larger issues behind this problem many of which relate to either teacher apathy or incompetence. Teacher apathy comes from the policy decision of the state that no students should be failed up to the ninth standard. The mechanism built into this policy for continuing evaluation throughout the year does not seem to work. Students come to the tenth standard without cumulatively building their knowledge and skills. They are made to cram and coached to pass the Board exam by ingenious ways. The incompetence of teachers (i.e. lack of, or indifference to updating themselves, lack of re-orientation for in-service teachers) is reflected in this fact. As per the new policy of the government, the curriculum and the learning materials are the same for the private (matriculation) schools and public (government and aided) schools. This was introduced a year ago in spite of much opposition from the management of private schools. After one year of implementation, the public school students have not done better compared to their performance in previous years, a study points out. The new common curriculum is generally praised by educationists as to their striving for quality and equality.

My suggestion to ASHA is to review the teacher intervention programs in public schools with regard to the common curriculum and see if there is room for its intervention. SEED could be the nodal agency for such an intervention program for the public schools in Madurai area. This is to augment government efforts in this regard.

The problem of lagging behind in learning could be approached from two perspectives. One is reaching the appropriate level in each grade within the government schools. The other is to match the level with private schools. Both can be done in an integrative manner. ASHA should see the larger educational scene in the state and push SEED in the direction of adapting itself to meet the new challenges. It obviously would need resources, material and human.

I found SEED to be at cross-roads at the moment both with regard to its personnel and its programs. I could instinctively sense the dilemma in both Karthik and Mansur. Both want to have decent support to maintain their families and meet their aspirations. They are looking for opportunities outside NGO world. Working with an NGO is not stable.

When I asked both of them what they expect from ASHA specifically, they said the maintenance support it is receiving must be received in time. Now there is even a delay of one month, which among other things, makes SEED lose its credibility (For example, the not-so-better-off woman who has rented her house to SEED becomes unhappy when the rent is not paid on time).

Second, the decision about Fellowship for Karthik needs to be taken quickly.

They asked about the state of opening an ASHA chapter in Madurai.

In sum, SEED needs not only the material and moral support of ASHA, it will also benefit from some guidance with regard to tackling the slow learning problem and college / career counseling for Karumbalai's successful high school graduates