Dear Asha-SV volunteers,

At request of Sekar (Asha-SV), I did a site visit of “Apna Skool” (A non-formal educational project for the children of migrant workers around the city of Kanpur). This project runs several non-formal educational centers at various locations (the exact number can be obtained from the master roll list attached with this report). Most of these centers are run at brick kiln or construction sites. Both of these occupations being of seasonal kind involve unskilled laborers who migrate to these work sites for 7-8 months during work season. Mostly the work season is from October to June, which does not align well with regular academic year. Children stay with their parents at these work sites and often help in work (sometime during regular school hours) and hence cannot go to regular schools. Often govt. schools also do not admit these children during mid-session (October) and these children leave for their native places before the admissions (July). The total number of children part of this project (as per the master roll list) is 588 out of which 46 also attend regular schools.

Of about 20 centers (or locations), I visited 3 locations (note: sometimes students from several centers come to one location). I had informed Vijaya didi regarding this visit and she sent a car to pick me up from IITK gate. She could not join for the visit of first two centers, but joined us for the third center visit.

My first visit was to Saran Brick Kiln (Saran) center. This brick kiln (and center) is located about 11 km. from IIT Kanpur (about 21 km. from city) and is just off the GT Road. There are currently 2 centers running at this location. This location has one room construction (given by the brick kiln owner). The second center was running in the shade just outside this room. There is no electricity and it was very dark inside the room. Also this being the summer season the room was very hot.
There were about 30 students present for Saran BK center and about 15 students for Kalra-2 center. Most of the older children could do addition/subtraction with carry over and a few could also do multiplication with carry over. Children also demonstrated some simple science experiments. These children are sometimes taken to places like post-office, bank, railway station, zoo and science exhibitions/museums. After a recent visit to a bank, children have started a bank of their own where children deposit money from their own earnings (from the brick kilns). All the students knew how much they have saved and the total was more than 5000 Rs. for this center. This money will be given back to them before they leave for their homes at the end of season. Children are also given some addressed postcards, which sometime they send back from their homes.

The space at which this center (room) is located has recently been bought by Lohia (Lohia group of Industries) and this center needs to be relocated. However, they have got the permission to complete this session (till June) at the current location. There is a box-library at each center from some students issue books either to read stories or sometime just to look at pictures (younger kids). Ms. Suneeta Shrivastava who is working as health worker also joined us and she informed me about health and hygiene of these children. There is also a first aid box at each center. Children are given vitamin supplements and mid-day meals (supported by Mala foundation). Ms. Shrivastava also councils parents for family planning and vaccination for children and organizes camps with local help.

Later, I discussed the issue of poor lighting and ventilation at this center and suggested solar-powered lamp and fan for this center. The project is already looking for this solution for this center + 2 other centers and this should be implemented soon.

From Saran BK location, we went to Tatiaganj location where currently 2 centers are running. Tatiaganj-1 center is run in a one room building (own building at own land) and Tatiaganj-2 center is run in the halls of Apna Ghar (A hostel facility for older children funded by Mala Foundation). At Tatiaganj-1 center, currently children from two centers (brick kilns) are coming (5 from Kalra-1 and 25 from ASP). This center is for younger children and the children are divided into 3 groups. Very young children play with blocks and learn poems and alphabets, older ones are taught math as well at class-1 level.
Most children could write their name in Hindi or English except a few very young kids. Some older children could do simple addition and subtraction. Children liked reciting poems and sometimes write their own. Children also showed some simple science experiments like voice travelling through a string and magnetic dancing dolls. Children also love making paper hats and wearing them. I also received some at each center.

Tatiaganj-2 center is run in Apna Ghar hostel building. At this center older children (class 2 to 5) from three centers are currently coming. Older children from Kalra-3, Manpur and Kalra-1 centers are coming to Tatiaganj-2. Classes for 2nd and 3rd class are run in the big hall and for 4th and 5th class in a room. The older children appeared a little bit shy but I received paper hats and flowers from the children at this center as well. Children showed some of their artwork and some science experiments. Children like coming to the center and the older children would like to continue education after class 5.
Since, I was at the location, I also visited Apna Ghar briefly and promised children there that I would come and spend more time there. Mala Foundation supports Apna Ghar and currently 23 children (all boys) are living in hostel. There is plan to open a hostel for girls as well. I did take some pictures.
From Tatiaganj we went to Vijaya didi’s house to pick her up and then we went to Panki Padav center. Panki Padav center is shifted to a new location in Gangaganj colony. This center is for the children of rag-pickers. Children also help in rag-picking in morning hours and come to center around mid-day. A “Bal-Sabha” (children’s meeting) was in progress and children were discussing wind in their meeting. Upon asking a question on main constituents of air, a debate ensued which was put to rest with the help of some reference from the books. This center is run in a room made of bamboos and plastic sheets though there is plan to rent a room nearby. Children at this center are most active and I was regaled with poems and plays in Hindi as well as Asamese, which I could follow from their act. Children also showed some of their crafts work (mask made by them) and some science projects like a ‘brush-n-rush’ made of a vibrating motor form an old cell phone and a cell-phone battery operated fan.
Children want to stop rag-picking and they have planned to open a fast-food stall “thela” with help of some older children. This was prompted by death of a child in a recent accident at a nearby railway-crossing while picking rag. These sorts of accidents are not uncommon for rag-pickers as railway tracks are prominent places to pick rag from (empty bottles etc.). Some girls are also learning stitching as means of some earning.

My overall impression was very positive from all centers. However, the issue of children not coming back in next season is always present. Though students are given a detailed report card stating their ability, so if they find an opportunity at their next location they can continue their education. Parents are also urged to seek opportunity wherever they go for work. Some progress can be seen in terms of students reaching and passing 5th grade (with continuity) and increasing demand for hostel facility like Apna Ghar. Parents are still reluctant to leave girls at a hostel, but this is something JBVS, Mala Foundation and Asha-Kanpur have to convince them for. Students for Apna Ghar are selected from these Apna Skool centers and the demand for this is slowly rising. Some children show a great aptitude towards learning and doing something different from what their parents and their parent’s parents have been doing. They want to break-free from this cycle and Apna Skool(s) are a small but very important step in that direction.
Some specific questions asked by Sekar:

1. The number of children has been increased to 675 from 600. Is there a way to verify?
   A: A master roll list was sent to me by JBVS, which I am attaching with my email. This list is for current session (2013-14) ending in June. The total no of children as per this list is 588.

2. There are 3 new centers. Is it possible to visit one?
   A: The 3 new centers are Kalra-3 with 20 children, Maharajpur with 30 children some of whom go to govt. school and Manpur with 17 children. I was not able to visit these centers, but some children from Kalra-3 center come to Tatiaganj-2 location.

3. Health and hygiene of these children?
   A: Children seem aware towards their health and hygiene. Vitamin supplements and mid-day meals are provided to children (from Mala Foundation).

4. What are the exit criteria for the project?
   A: There are no such criteria. The project is trying to help as many children as possible. If the children keep coming back to same work place or another work place within Kanpur area, there is some sort of continuity and children can get upto 5th grade. After that, there are some limited possibilities with Apna Ghar hostel. Children who do not return to Kanpur, we can hope that the children have taken some affinity to learning and would like to continue wherever they are.

5. RTE impact?
   A: RTE is a double-edged sword for projects like these. On one hand, under RTE such NFE centers are not allowed, children between 6-14 yrs. are expected to go to regular schools and children below should not be working. However, ground realities are very different. These children absolutely HAVE TO work. Now, centers like these are only possible way for these children to get some education, since no regular govt. schools are run according to their time. Govt. official may shut down these centers under RTE, however there is no practical provision for such kids.

Thanks,

Anshu Gaur  
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