

Asha Seattle Site Visit Report

Project : *CENTRE FOR LEARNING (CFL)*
Location : *Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India*
Site Visit Done By : *Vamshidhar Kommineni*
Site Visit Date : *Dec-23 2010*

Before the site visit

I contacted Ramgopal Koneripalli by phone and email and received instructions to the school. We agreed upon a site visit date. Since Ram couldn't be there on the day of the site visit we agreed to meet at a later time and that I would visit the school and speak with the founder Gurveen Kaur who would be there.

Day of the site visit

The location is a bit confusing, since it is located inside a residential colony. One of the teachers met us a short distance away from the school and helped us get to the place. I reached the school at lunch time and stayed for about 3 hours.

School Overview

The school is located in a residential area, and has a clean and inviting entrance. It is a small school (closer to a large house than a typical school building). There is a small open area/courtyard for lunch, outdoor activities, etc. The school building itself has 6 classrooms and a library/media room.

The school has the principal/founder Gurveen (who is still very actively involved in teaching and administration) along with 6 other teachers. Ram is one of the longstanding teachers and helps with many of the administration tasks. In addition, one person is employed to help with housekeeping. All teachers share in cooking the meal, keeping the school clean, etc.

At the time of the visit, they had about 60 children. These numbers fluctuate from year to year and in the year itself as the migrant families living in the area move away. Generally, they try to keep the school under 75 students and usually maintain a number around 65. ~40% of the schoolchildren (including some of the teacher's children) are from families who can afford to pay for education and pay on a sliding scale up to a maximum of Rs15,000 per year. The remaining 60% are sponsored and pay a very small fee (Rs500 per year for girls and Rs1000 per year for boys) mainly to serve as an incentive for the parents to continue sending their children to school. This paid/sponsored split is in keeping with one of the central philosophies of the school to integrate children from different socioeconomic backgrounds into the same learning environment. The sponsored children are generally from migrant laborer families who live in the area, while the paid children come from different parts of the city.

Site Visit Details

The students were just finishing up their lunch in the courtyard when I arrived. Note that CFL provides all its children with a nutritious home cooked meal which is cooked on premises and served by the teachers and the older children.

Gurveen showed me around the school building for a little while and then left me free to interact with the children, take pictures, etc. while she taught a class.

Generally the classrooms were clean, airy and with more of an open layout than a traditional school. The younger children's classrooms were on the ground floor, while the older children had their classes on the first floor. The library room is large and has a good selection of books. It also has a television and doubles as a media room for children to watch a movie as part of their curriculum.

The really young children (1st grade) only have classes before lunch and leave for home after having lunch. The 2nd and 3rd grade kids have more fun and interactive classes (e.g. learning through a song, outdoor dance, etc.) after lunch while the older children continue their regular classes (some of which do include arts and crafts, etc.). The open layout of the classrooms results in a more interactive learning environment. I observed four different classrooms during their first hour after lunch. The younger children were both singing (I believe this was the performing arts class) and learning language in an informal way through a song (an old Hindi song that the teacher played a few times, helped the children sing along as well as identifying words). After a while they went to the outside play area and had fun dancing to a few songs, with some help choreographing from the teacher. It was clear the students were really enjoying themselves and were very engaged with the teacher. Another class that I observed were learning Math from Vishu (one of the teachers). This was an older class (3rd or 4th grade) and was also quite interactive with lots of questions and answers back and forth with the teacher. Upstairs, the 6th and 7^h graders were learning Hindi from one of the teachers. Since they were practicing writing, this class was less interactive, though the teacher clearly gave the students the chance to progress at their own level. Gurveen was conducting a drawing and painting class for the few older children (8th-10th grades). I spent a bit of time talking with the older children as well while Gurveen stepped out for a bit about how long they had been at the school, how they liked it, etc.

In general, I came away with a very positive impression of how the school was run. This wasn't much of a formal tour, and Gurveen was nice enough to let me wander between classrooms, sit in the back, etc. This was clearly how the school functioned on a day to day basis, and not an attempt to change it in any way for the site visit. The teachers were all engaged with the children and doing a great job interacting with them, much more so than would occur at the sort of government school that Center for Learning serves as an alternative to. The children themselves were clearly happy to be at this school. They were all much more confident than their age and socioeconomic background would indicate. As well, it's a testament to the school's execution of their philosophy that I couldn't really tell apart the paid and sponsored children in the larger classes.

After spending about an hour and a half with the different classes, taking some pictures, etc. I sat down for about an hour and a half to chat with Gurveen. Details of this conversation are later in this document. After that I wrapped up the visit to the school. I met with Ram a couple of days later and the details of that conversation are in a later section as well.

If you've read this far, please take the time to read the "What works well at CFL" and "Overall Rating" sections of this report. I've separated some of my comments about CFL into these sections

Conversation with Gurveen

Gurveen and I had a long conversation about CFL. Since this was my first visit, I had a lot to learn and she gave me a lot of history (being the founder), context and frank responses to my questions.

We talked about how CFL measures itself as an organization, i.e. what are its metrics for success. Gurveen talked about how the ultimate goal is to make sure that the children in their school learn to the best of their abilities. Helping the children understand themselves better, become emotionally stable (some of their paid students are children that have had a very hard time fitting in at traditional schools) are part of their educational goals. She said that while academic success is important, she considers the children growing up to be socially responsible and learning how to strive for excellence as much more important. We talked about the other activities that the school contributed to including their education newsletter, their input to curriculum policy and development, etc. As well, Gurveen cited the fact that surviving as long as they have (nearly 30 years) and staying true to their principles has itself been a challenge. I agree that this is a worthy achievement driven primarily by her passion and engagement with this cause.

We spent time talking about finances, growth, etc. Given that they have paid for the school land and building, their primary costs are salaries, food costs for the meal, utilities and maintenance. If she could get more funding, she would increase the salaries of the teachers since most of them make far below government teacher salaries and she wishes her teachers to have a reasonable living wage that enables to support their own families. She talked about the challenges of fundraising in India where things are driven primarily by personal contacts and recurring donations are rare. Corporations are also limited in their giving and those that do are reluctant to donate to smaller organizations like CFL. Gurveen's ideas are not to grow the school beyond the size where it currently is. She doesn't feel that the children would benefit from a larger school, nor would the teachers be able to scale (even if they hired more teachers, issues like teacher turnover, etc. do matter). She would rather do the best for the school at its current size. Her ideas for scale are around contributing through writing (CFL publishes an education newsletter roughly every quarter) as well as continuing to participate in government and other forums around curriculum development based on their experiences at CFL.

We also touched on the issue of continuity of the school when the time for Gurveen to retire/scale back comes up. This is one of the challenges for the school as I saw it. Gurveen said she has tried to find a good successor multiple times, but folks would leave after many years for various personal reasons (spouse moving out of town for work, etc.). At this point, she focuses on what she can do while she is actively engaged and hopes that if the work is important enough, someone will come forward and step up to take over.

While the school is doing well and will continue to run in the same way in the 2011-2012 academic year, there is a lot of uncertainty around what will happen for 2012-2013 (or 1-2 years later). This is driven by the changes from the Right to Education bill that has significant impact on alternative education schools like CFL. We spoke at length about this. Challenges include lack of clarity on alternative education schools, satisfying the minimum requirements for the required government certification (playground space, etc. which CFL does not have in its current setting and which would be very hard to raise money

for, given the price of real estate in the city now), red tape and bribes required to get any sort of government certification and subsequent renewals (this is a problem that has been getting worse in Andhra Pradesh in the last few years in all areas including education), etc. Possible solutions include converting CFL to an after school learning center that children voluntarily came to after their government schooling, refocusing to work with older children that need supplemental help, or another as yet unexplored direction. Asha will need to monitor this in future years and help in whatever way we can.

Conversation with Ram

Ram and I met a few days later since I couldn't make it to the school on a day that he was working (unfortunately, the one day that he was out was the only day I could visit the school). We had a good conversation about the school and Ram's involvement. We focused more on the data and the numbers since Gurveen indicated that Ram is the one who keeps track of the analytical and administrative end of the school. We covered enrollment numbers, fees for paid vs sponsored children, teacher salaries and fundraising.

In general, I came away with a very positive impression of Ram. This is clearly a labor of love for him, since he could put his skillset to use in a different profession (I believe he used to work in IT before moving to the non-profit space) and make considerably more money. He is young (in his late 30s to early 40s?) and strikes me as the perfect person to provide continuity for CFL if/when Gurveen chooses to retire. I hope he continues to stay fully engaged with CFL. If there are things that Asha can do to help him with his personal growth and development in the non-profit space, we should do so.

What works well at CFL

I think CFL is a great model for a small school run by a passionate founder and volunteers that works very well due to their high engagement and caring for the children. Its longevity and continued adherence to their mission and principles are a testament to the effort put in by all the people who are involved.

The school has good premises that are clean and welcoming for the children. The success of the school is apparent to anyone who spends even half a day with the children who go to school here. The children were engaged and confident and genuinely looked like they enjoyed going to school here. I would compare their social and all round development to some of the better (and much more expensive) private schools in the city.

The founder Gurveen, is still very engaged and brings a lot of energy and experience over her long non-profit career. The other staff members are very engaged. Ram is a great asset for the school and I hope that he continues to stay involved and engaged.

Challenges and areas for improvement CFL

The single biggest challenge facing CFL in the next few years is how to adapt to the new rules and regulations imposed by the Right to Education bill. This applies to all alternate education schools in the country including a number of the projects supported by Asha. Figuring out what form the school will need to take to both fulfill the new government rules while staying true to the mission of CFL is the most important thing for the organization to solve.

A secondary concern is around building a succession plan and ensuring continuity for the school. Many organizations falter and die when their founders are no longer able to participate as actively as they once did. CFL has many positive things to contribute, both for the group of children they educate each year and through their broader efforts of training teachers who work there for a few years about their approach to education and their contribution to education policy and curriculum development. It would be unfortunate if these contributions were to stop due to the lack of continuity.

Lastly, the school needs to find a way to raise funds more effectively. The small staff and day to day grind of running the school leaves Gurveen and Ram with very little time to evangelize and raise funds for their cause. Being able to engage and seek a commitment for recurring donations from companies and high net worth individuals within the Hyderabad community would go a long way to make the school a self-sustaining entity. In the long term (5-15 years), donations from Asha and other US charities will not be able to contribute an equivalent percentage of funds to Indian organizations due to rising standards and cost of living in India coupled with much slower income growth and attendant fund raising capacity in the US.

How Asha can help CFL

Asha can help CFL in their efforts to work with Right to Education bill by connecting them with other projects that are dealing with the same issue. They can help them raise funds directly (especially Asha Seattle) by putting them in touch with people in Hyderabad (say from Microsoft Hyderabad). Asha of course needs to continue supporting the school monetarily and if possible, increase funding for the school.

What Asha can learn from CFL

The biggest takeaway (my opinion) for Asha is the importance of evaluating organizations on a personal level, especially the character and commitment of the founder or main administrator of the projects we donate to. Asha serves as a funding agency and facilitator along with oversight for our project partners. But it is our partners who do the daily hard work that makes or breaks the service to children and their education that is Asha's mission. Sometimes, smaller, less scalable schools like CFL with the right mix of committed founders and volunteers are exactly what we need to support in order to further this mission. Evaluation of an organization like this is not possible without a site visit and detailed conversations around how and what they do.

Overall Rating & Summary

CFL is an exemplary model of a small school focused on alternative education to teach children grow up to be socially responsible and motivated to improve their own lives. It has been doing an admirable job of this for the last thirty years. Asha should be proud to support an organization like this and should continue doing so while CFL stays true to their guiding principles. In terms of improvements, CFL needs to address the direction of their organization over the next few years to comply with the Right to Education bill. Their founder and administrators also need to improve their fund raising capability to continue execution of their goals. I hope to see CFL continue to execute at the level that they have been doing for a very long time to come.

Photos



P1. The CFL school building as viewed from the road



P2. School entrance



P3. Classroom (empty at lunch time)



P4. Classroom (empty at lunch time)



P5. Library and media room



P6. Younger children learning through a song



P7. Continuation of the younger children's class outdoors



P8. Informal layout of classrooms



P9. Interactive learning vs a formal classroom setting



P10. Older students in their art class



P11. The founder (Gurveen, on left) and teachers at the end of the school day