

Project Pearl – A site visit report

Dates: 31st October & 1st November, 2009

Asha Chennai volunteers: Sivasankar and Bhaskar

The objective of this trip was three-fold:

1. To conduct campus interviews at District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), Vanaramutti in Thoothukudi district for selection of two teachers.
2. To open an Asha Chennai library at E.Velayudhapuram in Melamanthai panchayat.
3. To kick-off the first Project Pearl teachers' meeting.

Teachers' selection process at DIET (Saturday - 31st October, 2009)

We had held the first formal teachers' selection process in August. We selected five candidates, only one of whom was able to join eventually. We continued to solicit applications since and held three more sessions to select teachers. The written tests for these sessions were conducted by a government teacher Mr.Chinnadurai locally, while the interviews were held over phone by Asha Chennai volunteers. We were able to appoint two more teachers up until October leaving us with two more vacancies. Hence, we decided to conduct a round of campus interviews at the DIET campus in Thoothukudi district.

The DIET Principal Mr.Narayanaswamy arranged for 15 students, who had graduated over the past four years, to attend the selection process this Saturday. Mr.Chinnadurai, Sivasankar and I arrived at the campus in the morning but due to some misinformation about change of venue, we had to go to another teacher training institute near Kovilpatti only to be sent back to DIET. Five current students were assigned to help us with the process if needed.

We gave a brief introduction about Asha, our activities and Project Pearl, after which we got the written test started. This lasted an hour and 15 minutes. We then evaluated the tests for the next one hour – the results gave us four candidates who scored the required cut-off marks. We asked these four candidates to stay behind for interviews. Each interview lasted about half an hour and we informed the candidates that we would get back to them in a couple of days' time. We completed the entire process at about 4pm, thanked the DIET students who had helped us and provided us lunch, and left.

The three volunteers were impressed with only one of the four candidates namely Mr.Durai. He completed his D.T.Ed at DIET in 2005 and was working in his land as a farmer. We offered him the job that night and asked him to choose between the Primary School at Vilvamarathupatti and the Middle School at Anandan Madan Patcheri. The latter was quite far from his village and so he chose the former though it is a 2-hour commute one-way from his village as he preferred to commute instead of staying away from his family.

All in all, it was a good experience to conduct campus interviews at DIET. We established a good relationship with the institute and hope we can work with them in the future on several areas including in-service training, curriculum, quality of education, etc.

Opening of Asha Chennai Viswanathan Library at E.Velayudhapuram (Sunday – 1st November, 2009)

One of the components proposed in this project for this year is to start a library in two villages where we are also involved in the schools. In this regard, the first place we identified was a village called E.Velayudhapuram in Melamanthai panchayat. During one of our earlier site visits, we happened to meet a few social workers and one of

them Mr.Siluvaikani is from this village. A few weeks before this trip, we spoke to him about the possibility of opening a library, the need for one, the patronage we would get and if there were other libraries nearby. He said that it would be a good idea to open a library at E.Velayuthapuram as there isn't one in a 3km radius and the village happens to be the access point for five other interior villages.

Incidentally, Siluvaikani was already helping the villagers in different ways – helping women with savings and SHG activities, filling application forms for people applying to various government schemes, running a youth club and so on. He has also been given a room for this purpose by the local panchayat. When we asked him if he could run a library, he gladly accepted. He said that we could use the same room to start the library, with electricity and maintenance taken for by the panchayat.

With a librarian and room in place, we bought a table, four stools, a mat, extra lighting and some wall maps for the library to begin with. We also subscribed to an English newspaper, four Tamil newspapers, few other magazines and periodicals. The plan was to provide a lot of books once the library was up and running. **We decided to dedicate the library in honour of Asha Chennai volunteer Late Mr.Viswanathan, and named the library “Asha Chennai Viswanathan Noolagam”.**

Siluvaikani invited an elderly village person for formally opening the library on the morning of November 1st, 2009. Few villagers, three Asha Chennai teachers, two government teachers and two Asha Chennai volunteers were there for the occasion. Once the ribbon was cut and chocolates distributed, we spent an hour or so discussing the plans for the library, implementation details, tracking mechanism, accounting procedure, etc. We sought the opinion of the people about the kind of books they and the responses included history, general knowledge, spoken English, competitive exam preparatory material and so on. There was acceptance for the suggestion that the library should also be used a place to conduct education and health awareness campaigns on a regular basis. Having had a productive session, we thanked the people there to proceed to a teachers' meeting.

Teachers' meeting (Sunday – 1st November, 2009)

We wanted to kickoff Project Pearl teachers' meeting during the trip. Three of the four Asha teachers namely Mr.Gopinath of Panicker Kulam PUPS, Mr.John Baul of Nagalapuram PUMS and Mr.Durai of Vivamarathupatti PUPS were present. Ms.Theresa, the teacher at Melmandhai PUPS was unable to attend as she had gone to her hometown for a family emergency. We had also invited a couple of government school teachers Mr.Glarance and Mr.Chinnadurai to the meeting. They have been showing keen interest and volunteering quite a bit of their time for this project in various aspects – teachers' selection process, conducting written tests, identifying appropriate educational materials for children, finding accommodation for women teachers from out-of-town and so on.

We got seated in the shade of a large tree inside a temple. The objectives of the meeting were to get introduced to each other, provide the Asha teachers an orientation session about effectively using Activity-Based-Learning (ABL) methodology and the operational aspects of their work as Asha employees. After a round of introductions, Glarance and Chinnadurai started to explain the ABL methodology and how they handle the different subjects under this program. They cited examples of things that are effective and ineffective in the entire scheme. They also pointed to some of the things that children prefer and take to easily – spoken English, working in groups, using 3-dimensional materials for Maths are some of them. Overall, the Asha teachers got a good overview of the methodology and expressed hope that they would be able to put some of the ideas to work at their schools.

We then had an open discussion about the introduction of “Samacheeyar Kalvi (Equitable Education)” to be introduced by the TamilNadu government in 2010. News sources indicate that it would be implemented for classes I and VI to begin with. The government teachers said they did not know what to expect and were not really sure about the future of ABL given this new scheme. Something for us to watch closely.