

## **Project Pearl – Teachers’ selection process**

**Dates:** 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

**Asha Chennai volunteers:** Vikram Bajwa, Sivasankar and Bhaskar

There were two main objectives for this trip:

1. To meet the Assistant Elementary Educational Officers (AEEOs) of three unions to seek their cooperation in our involvement with the panchayat schools of their blocks.
2. To administer the first formal teachers’ selection process at Thoothukudi.

### **Background on the selection process:**

Before starting implementation of this new project, I had talked to the District Elementary Educational Officer (DEEO) of Thoothukudi district a few times over the phone and he had agreed to allow us to work in panchayat schools under his jurisdiction. He wanted to meet us personally, and so Ram (Asha-Blr), who was there to visit Isha Vidhya School, and I met him earlier in June. We gave an introduction about Asha and about this project we were about to implement in Thoothukudi district. I mentioned that using DISE reports, we had identified five schools in three blocks that have had inadequate teachers for a few years. We were interested in working closely with these schools at different levels starting from appointing well-qualified teachers, and were seeking his approval. He readily agreed and said he would inform the AEEOs of different blocks about our involvement as well.

With the approval in place, we were ready to hire teachers. One of the main things we wanted to do in this project was to appoint only teachers who have certified teachers’ training (D.T.Ed, B.Ed) degrees or are graduates/post-graduates with an interest in teaching. More importantly, we wanted to have a formal selection process for such teachers before they get appointed to the different government schools. We wanted to ensure that the candidates would have some minimum analytical and quantitative abilities. We were also looking for young teachers who were confident about themselves, were clear communicators and in general, motivated.

We placed an advertisement in the Thirunelveli-Thoothukudi edition of Tamil daily “Dhina Thanthi” dated 05-Jul-09 calling for applications for five teacher positions. We also sent word through government teachers and other local people soliciting applications. Over a month, we received about 30 applications. We filtered out about 5 applications, either for lack of minimum qualification or if the candidate had a very long break from teaching. We called the 25 applicants for the selection process on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2009 [add link here].

The written test was divided into three sections with 20 Maths questions, 20 Sciences questions and 5 English language questions with weights of 1, 2 or 3 for each question. The Maths and Sciences questions (in Tamil) were designed to be analytical and understanding-oriented with just a couple of memory-based ones. They were based on class VIII and IX curriculum and were derived from various sources including public service exam material. The English questions were not meant to be too significant for the selection but were put in place for us to get a picture. Also, the idea of the written test was not to see if the candidates finished in time but rather to give them sufficient time to think through and attempt all questions, so we were quite flexible with it.

We set a cut-off range of 55-60% for the written test and decided to call only those who scored above that for the interviews. As mentioned before, we were looking for teachers who were articulate and could discuss education-related issues clearly during the interviews. Some of the discussions/questions we had designed for the interview included:

- Child-centric vs. teacher-centric schooling
- Tamil or English as medium of instruction and all associated issues
- Three things you would change in the school you studied
- Situational questions (what if parent complains about a certain thing, what if HM is un-cooperative, etc)

### **Site visit report by Vikram**

Project Pearl which derived its name from the famous pearl fishery of Thoothukudi (Tuticorin) district is one of the many projects being run by ASHA Chennai. Thoothukudi or Tuticorin is situated at extreme south-eastern corner of Tamil Nadu and is about 346 miles from Chennai.

Bhaskar and I started from Chennai - Egmore station on 6th August 2009 at 6:30pm. Next day on 7th August, early morning around 6am, we got down at the Kovilpatti railway station. We had scheduled a meeting with Mr.Rajendran, the AEEO of Kayathar block that morning. After having breakfast, we contacted him and we decided to meet at the Kovilpatti railway station at 8am. The additional AEEO of Kayathar block Ms.Jayalatha had indicated that she would try to join the meeting if possible but she could not. The meeting lasted for about 40 minutes during which we gave a background about ASHA, explained what we are trying to do and that we had taken approval from the DEEO. The AEEO discussed at length about the latest education method taught using ABL and the problems being faced by the administration. The AEEO's response was very positive when it came to ASHA's upcoming role.

We then went to Thoothukudi and found a motel not very far from the bus station. After keeping our luggage, we at once started to meet the two AEEOs of the Ottapidaram block, with whom we had fixed an appointment. But before we could board the bus, we were forced to re-schedule the meeting as they were busy in some official meeting. We were told to be at the Ottapidaram AEEO office at 4pm that evening. We reached Ottapidaram at the scheduled time, but the AEEOs were able to show up at 5pm after they finally rounded up the meetings. We had a long conversation about our project and both gentlemen were very enthusiastic about it. They assured us of cooperation for the project and said they would instruct the teachers in the schools concerned about our intervention.

Incidentally, the HM of Anandan Madan Patcheri, one of the schools we were looking to appoint a teacher in, had also come to meet us. She said it would be very useful if we provide an additional teacher to her school as there has always been a shortage. She cautioned us that the school is quite inaccessible and all the government teachers rely on two-wheelers to commute.

After completing the meeting, we went back to Thoothukudi. We spent the next couple of hours organizing things for the written test the next day. Mr.Glarance is a government teacher whom Bhaskar had met in an earlier trip and had been in touch with since. He and another government teacher Mr.Chinnadurai were kind enough to arrange a venue for this selection. Glarance has been very supportive of our efforts and is quite interested in the upliftment of the rural educational infrastructure. He came over to meet us that night and we had a long chat. He gave us pointers about what to look for during the interview. He mentioned that Chinnadurai and he would not be able to attend the selection as that Saturday was declared a working day.

The venue arranged was Alagappah University's distance education centre at Thoothukudi. Sivasankar joined us the next day on 8th August, and the three of us started for the venue where we had called interested applicants for the post of ASHA teachers. It felt very good to see the overwhelming response of the applicants. About 23 applicants (18 women, 5 men) showed up for the first round of the written test. Before beginning with the test, Bhaskar gave an introduction to the candidates about ASHA and the various projects being run by ASHA Chennai. The candidates were explained about project pearl and for choosing the five villages in the Thoothukudi district.

Questions?  
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With the help of the centre staff, we made the arrangement for the written test in a well planned classroom and a separate room was used for correction purpose. The exam started at 10:30am and lasted an hour and 15 minutes. We evaluated the tests and we shortlisted a total of five candidates who had scored just below or the required cut-off initially planned. Incidentally, all the five selected were women. We explained the project more elaborately to these candidates and our expectations from them for this project. We clarified that they will be working in government schools as PTA teachers with approval from the concerned officials. The second round of face to face interviews for the five candidates started soon after lunch and lasted about three hours total. Each of us made observations about each candidate and set about discussing their candidature after the interviews were over.

We were very impressed with three candidates namely Ms.Helina from Tirunelveli district, Ms.Aruna Devi from Kayathar block and Ms.Theresa from Ramnad district. We decided to make an offer to them within the next two days. We decided to keep two other candidates, Ms.Usha Rani from Kayathar block and Ms.Rishiya from Thiruchendur, on a wait-list for a couple of weeks with a plan to conduct another round of selection during that period.

Before leaving we thanked the director of distance education centre Mr.Kathiresa Pandian for giving ASHA a helping hand by providing place to conduct the exam. He said he was glad to be of help and to approach him for any such help in the future.

After having a light meal and a cup of coffee, we headed back to the Thoothukudi district railway station and boarded a train back to Chennai at 7:45 Pm the same day.

#### Update at end of August:

Among the five candidates, only Theresa has taken up the offer and joined the school at Melamanthai. Aruna Devi and Usha Rani are unable to accept because the school they are working in currently would not return their originals until the end of academic year 2009-10. Helina and Rishiya are not joining as their parents would not allow them to be away from home and work in remote rural schools.

Meanwhile, we selected another candidate Mr.Gopinath who was posted at the school at Panicker Kulam.