

Shikshamitra site visit report

Name of project: Shikshamitra (Friends of learning)

Dates of site visit: Dec 20th and 21st, 2010

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I visited Shikshamitra during 20th and 21st December, 2010 at their Chetla, Kolkata center. Swati Sircar and Sudeshna Sinha (coordinator of Shikshamitra) received me at Shikshamitra. During my visit I met several students who were attending their respective classes. The students were lively and I had a great time talking to them. The school has around 30 students 7-16 years of age.

Students enthusiastically showed me their paintings, art and crafts. Some of these were of high quality made from recycled items. While I was busy talking to the co-ordinator one of the students came to Sudeshna and asked whether he should throw away the wood shavings produced from pencil sharpening. Later on I learned that students at Shikshamitra are encouraged to use waste materials in their everyday art and craft. Thus the students are taught to recycle waste. I clicked some pictures of the students posing with their art work.

Some students sat in a meditation class. A few of them were not attentive. To help the students focus on the task they played soft music.



Students posing with their art and crafts



Meditating students

In the audio-visual class some students were viewing a cartoon movie. One instructor was present. She would pause the movie from time to time and was asking questions on what the students understood from the respective clip. The students answered and she gave her feedback. Sometimes on the suggestion of the students she would let the students watch the movie for a longer time and only asked questions after long durations. Shikshamitra wants to train teachers from other schools on similar teaching techniques using the audio-visual medium. The training will focus on framing relevant questions that will help the students understand and explain their observations better.



The poetry class was interesting. Students were given one sentence and were asked to write the next sentence. They could not come up an immediate answer. However after some struggle and help from the instructor they did come up with rhyming sentences.

Shikshamitra students are good in speaking but they lack writing skills. Sudeshna showed me some teaching materials that are used in the creative writing class. These include pictures. Students are encouraged to construct stories connecting these pictures. They are also instructed to write about their everyday experiences.



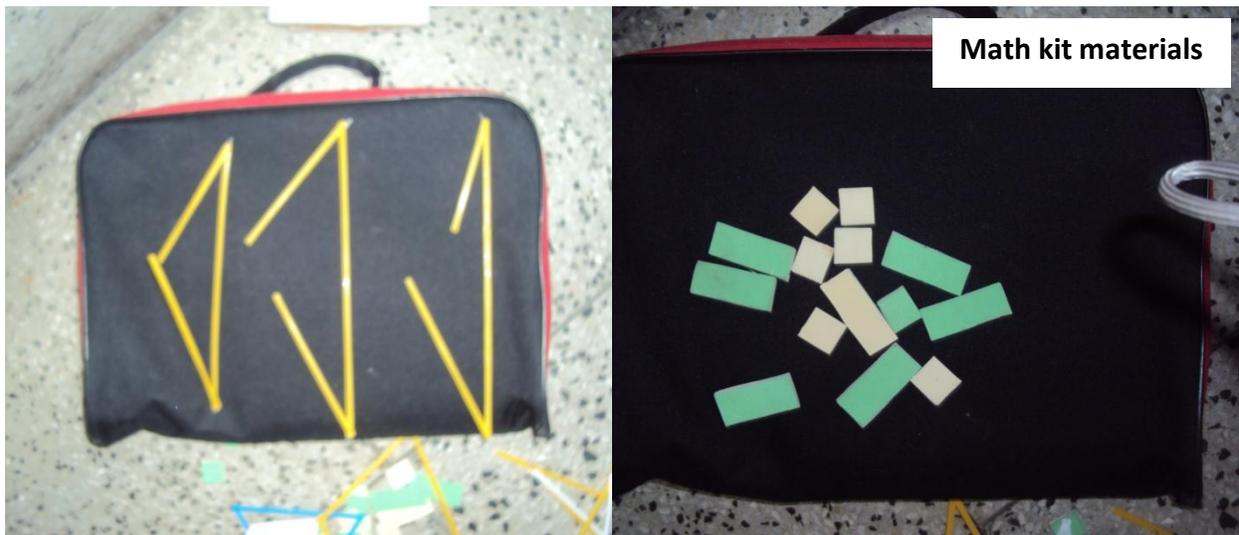
Creative writing using pictures



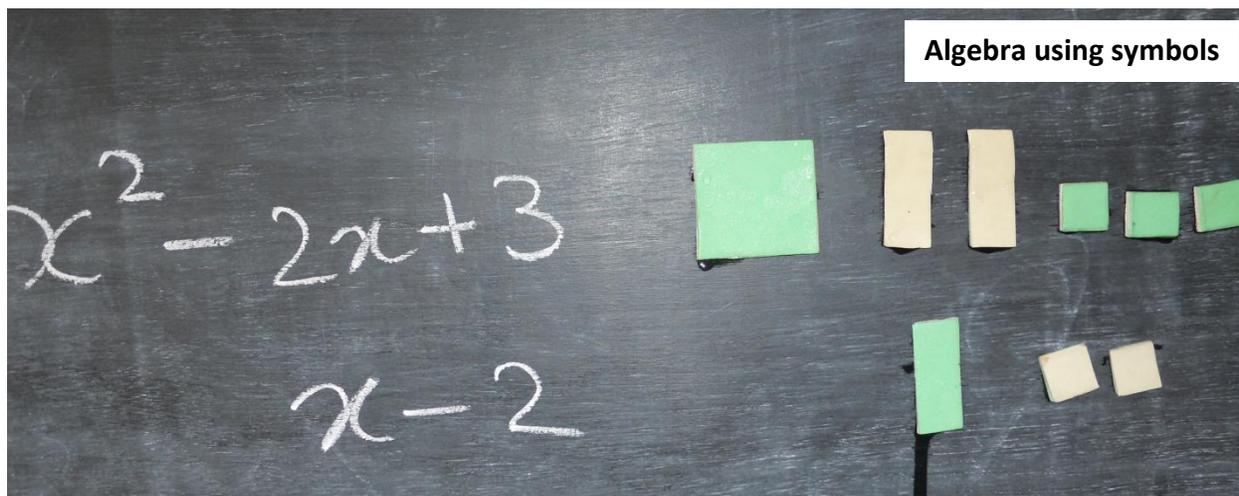
Poetry class

The creative writing class was initiated to encourage students think creatively and write their ideas down. I learned about the hurdles teachers faced when this class started. The students who attended different schools before Shikshamitra were reluctant to think and write. It seemed most of these students were used to writing stuff which their teachers wrote in the blackboard and thus they had not developed the habit of writing on their own.

Regular students at Shikshamitra take computer classes every week. The children showed me nice drawings that they made using Microsoft Paint. During my visit some of them were busy typing sentences about their own likes and dislikes and information about their family. The sentences had several errors but the students were enthusiastic and made efforts to correct them. They asked me for my feedback on the correctness of what they had typed.



Swati showed me some teaching materials that are used to teach maths to the students. Teachers who get trained by Shikshamitra learn how to use these materials effectively in class. These teaching tools are prepared from cheap materials like plastic straws, pins, elastic items etc. and can be made very easily. Swati is teaching algebra using some symbols involving squares, circles and rectangles which seemed novel to me. I was told that this method helps students visualize maths and thus helps in their conceptual understanding.



I interviewed one of the staffs at Sikshamitra, Mousumi Santra. She has masters in social work (MSW) and is with Shikshamitra since 2008. She is the liaison between parents and children at Shikshamitra. Before Shikshamitra she worked for various organizations like Kolkata network of HIV positive people (KNT), Kolkata Urban services for the poor (KUSP) etc. Ms. Santra helps Shikshamitra deal with student absenteeism and psychologist counseling for students who need help. She also manages a community library (every Thursday 4-5 pm) outside the school premises for the benefit of the community members. Her other responsibilities include networking with different organizations and help Shikshamitra students get support from these institutions. She helped a disabled student, Babai who was good in art and craft to get in touch with Tomorrow's Foundation, an organization that deals with craft items. Babai is currently working in this organization. Some other organizations she worked with are Prajaak and Hope Foundation. Shikshamitra allows outsiders who are not enrolled as regular students to take computer classes in the school. Ms. Santra helps in managing this computer class.

Biswajit Chitrakar came to Shikshamitra in 2005 from another NGO called CINI ASHA. Currently Biswajit is a faculty at Shikshamitra. The administration at Shikshamitra is happy with Biswajit's work. During my visit Biswajit accompanied some students to show them the underground metro railway at Kolkata. He looked friendly and helpful. I was told that the students like him very much and he teaches at the school. Biswajit also helps with training teachers.

Barakhari chart for language learning:

ক	কা	কি	কু	কে	কো
খ	খা	খি	খু	খে	খো
গ	গা	গি	গু	গে	গো
ঘ	ঘা	ঘি	ঘু	ঘে	ঘো

Primary Math - Bridge

৯৯৮-

Math problems on flowers and leaves:

- Flower 1: $19 + 37 =$
- Flower 2: $36 + 34 =$
- Flower 3: $24 + 26 =$
- Flower 4: $18 + 42 =$
- Flower 5: $92 - 22 =$
- Flower 6: $56 + 24 =$
- Leaf 1: $30 + 30 =$
- Leaf 2: $9 + 51 =$
- Leaf 3: $90 - 30 =$
- Leaf 4: $65 - 5 =$
- Pot 1: $33 + 24 + 33 =$
- Pot 2: $50 + 34 + 16 =$
- Pot 3: $29 + 31 + 40 =$

Legend:

- ৫০ = পোঁচাঙ্গী
- ৬০ = সপ্তত্বে
- ৭০ = সপ্তদ
- ৮০ = পঁচাত্তর
- ৯০ = নব্বই
- ১০০ = শত

Some facts about Shikshamitra:

- *Experimental school for 9-16 year old kids:* There are a lot of primary and pre-primary schools for children upto 9-10 years but not enough schools for 10-14 year olds. This is the reason why Shikshamitra focused on this age group. This school is meant for normal students however most of current students are from slums. It is different from a typical school because its objective is to educate students by giving them a more holistic education to get on with their life compared to that provided in mainstream schools.
- *Shikshamitra's vision (from their own website) is as follows:*
"Shikshamitra envisions a society where economics is guided by the concept of sufficiency and wants are limited. All work – manual and intellectual – is given equal respect. Humans live in harmony with nature, and creativity and diversity are encouraged. In this society, universal love and tolerance is actively practiced. Working to create an alternative model, Shikshamitra believes that child education has to be in tune with this larger vision of society. We run an open learning centre and education resource center in Kolkata and look forward to sharing with you."
- Shikshamitra is involved in methods and material development for the education of these kids. It strives to build confidence in these children by providing a lot of encouragement, training these children with audio visuals etc.
- *Number of students in the school:* 30
- *Number of teachers:* 6
- *Co-ordinator: Sudeshna Sinha*
Born in 1961 in Kolkata, Sudeshna studied Psychology in College; did a Montessori training course, and then a Diploma in Education of Physically Handicapped in Mumbai which she finished in 1987. For four years till 1991 she was teaching and counseling children and adults of mixed disabilities. Between 1992-94, she was a Remedial Teacher in St. George's Free School for underprivileged children – a school run by Christian Brothers in Kolkata. Then she was asked to start and run Ashirvad Vidyalaya – an afternoon Hindi medium school for older underprivileged children (8-16 years) of migrant laborers who are either school dropouts or have never been to school, which she did till 2004. From 2005 she has been running SHIKSHAMITRA.
- *Swati Sircar*
She is the math teacher in Shikshamitra and also helps in co-ordinating the school and the training programs. Swati is an ex-Asha, Seattle volunteer and has a few years of experience working for Asha.

- Azim premji from Wipro is interested in the materials developed by Shikshamitra for teaching languages. Premzi foundation is currently funding Shikshamitra and collaborating with them in developing teaching/learning materials.
- *Teaching techniques used in this school*
 1. Accelerated Reading
 2. Creative Writing
 3. Foundation English
 4. Primary Math – Formal
 5. Primary Math – Bridge
 6. Middle school math
 7. Environment Education
 8. Art & Craft

My opinion on the site visit:

The teachers are making genuine efforts to make education more enjoyable and effective for the students. The nice art and craft work by the students from recycled items, audio-visual classes, creative writing etc. are examples which show the spirit of experimentation that exists in this school.

Unfortunately, the school is struggling with student drop outs. One of the reason for student drop out being the inability of the school to provide certificates (This school does not follow Govt. Curriculum). Students seek certificates for their education. However to give certificates Shikshamitra will need to be registered with the Government. For registration they will need to have an elected body to run the school. That essentially means that they will loose all control over how the school is run, what is taught & how it is taught. This will prevent them from experimenting with education which is the sole reason why the school exists in the first place. They help the students that need certificates take the standard board exams through open schools. The second reason for student dropout is the migration of families from the locality to other places due to security issues. Hence the authorities decided to stop the school and instead concentrate on training teachers.

Because of this new decision to stop the school, there are some modifications in the Shikshamitra budget that they submitted to Asha. Some of their funding from AID, Kolkata SEEDS, Japan etc. will end because these agencies were only interested in the Shikshamitra school. The rent for the school where their current office is located was sponsored by these organizations. The school is on one floor of an apartment consisting of 6-7 rooms (2,100 sq. ft.). They are paying Rs. 240K annually for the school space. Now that the funding from the above mentioned agencies will stop, Shikshamitra is willing to pay half the rent from their own account and wants Asha to pay the remaining half i.e. Rs. 120K (\$2666 per year). They want to keep this space because they think they can accommodate all the teachers willing to get trained from Shikshamitra in this building. Thus they can take care of the food and accommodation for the teachers and this will also make it easier for them to conduct the training. This should also bring down the cost of training the teachers (not included in the budget).

Shikshamitra has done a lot of teacher training for the last five years. Details can be found in the project proposal. Some of the organizations that they have worked with are:

Sanlaap: An NGO based in Calcutta working in the area of human rights protection for women and girls.

Praajak: Provides education to children living on railway platforms.

Marfat: They take care of the bidi workers.

They have also worked with an NGO called *Nivedita* and with other Government schools.

How the training program with Asha projects will shape up needs to be seen. One concern is the number of trainers in Shikshamitra. They will certainly need more people to do the training effectively. Overall, I think Shikshamitra is a good project that has the capability of training Asha school teachers and I recommend this project for support from Asha General Funds (GF).

Important Links:

- Proposal details and other documents: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=1079>
- Shikshamitra blog: <http://shikshamitrlearning.blogspot.com/>
- Swanirvar website: <http://www.swanirvarbengal.org/>
- Shikshamitra news: http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100907/jsp/calcutta/story_12897237.jsp