

Shristi Special Academy – site visit by Mary Fernandes.

I work with SEWA, Gujarat, and as part of an internship program with many organizations serving the mentally disabled children, I visited many institutions in Bangalore, Jaipur, Delhi and Hyderabad, particularly in the context of community based activities and early intervention programs through screening of individuals.

I had gone to visit the rural (main) campus of Shristi on December 22nd, 2011. The school was as such closed for Christmas vacations and there were no children present that day. The teachers were attending a training session, on campus, by a renowned audiologist from Bangalore.

I met Sharon and Suchi and they gave me a tour of the campus. The campus was located in Chennhalli village which was off Magadi Road, on the outskirts of Bangalore. There was a person who lived on the property with his family and acted as the watchman and also took care of a large kitchen garden. Children are provided with breakfast, lunch and an evening snack. They come in at 10:00 and they are there till around three. The younger children leave after lunch.

There are classes in the main building. There is the Chiguru unit which is a free play school for the children from the surrounding villages. These children spend half a day till lunch time. Shristi tries and identifies learning disabilities in children at a very young age, because this can be corrected by intervention through teaching methods/ therapy. They provide food to the children to address nutritional deficiencies they may be facing at home. This is not exclusively for children with special needs.

Children with severe mental retardation are also here. The Autism children are in Nagarbavi and we didn't visit them. There is also the physiotherapy room with the physiotherapist coming in every week. All the children are evaluated regularly and ones with problem are given more time. Overall at Shristi, the children are taught basic life skills so that they can take care of themselves and be as independent as possible.

We spent time with the CBR team primarily. We visited a few local villages and participated in Shristi's CBR program, of identifying potential children with learning or mental disabilities, and referring them for a more detailed checkup.

Overall, Shristi does a great job with its curriculum and children. Teacher retention can be an issue since a lot of special education schools have come up right in the middle of Bangalore, which charge a good amount of money and are able to provide good salaries to teachers. This is one reason why the teachers need to be paid quite well, apart from the fact that most of them are well qualified and well trained.