

Jagriti (aka Apna School) Site Visit

Date: Feb 25, 2011

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I was able to provide only few hrs of notice to Vijaya-didi but she was kind enough to accompany me to 2 of the Apna School centers. Vijaya didi informed me that students from most of the centers had left for Agra that morning on a 1-day educational tour but we could visit some of the newer centers. I met Vijaya didi, Mahesh bhai and Manoj bhai at IIT Gate at 2pm. Manoj bhai drove us to Kalra-II brick kiln buying sweets and fruits for kids on our way. On our way, Vijaya didi explained to me current state of affairs - due to extremely high food inflation most of the older kids have had to drop out of the program; there has been some drop in migrant workers from Bihar this year as a result of development in Bihar; she was most worried about immediate-term effects of RTE which for now means they may lose many of their teachers as government is going to hire 70000+ teachers in next 4 months. RTE has also led to B.Ed. crash courses whereby apparently people can obtain normally 3-yr B.Ed. degree in 3 months as B.Ed. teachers will get Rs.13000+ p.m. While this may have been ok if neighborhood schools would admit the migrant worker kids, it is not clear they would. Further, Apna schools attempt to teach year's worth of material in 6-months that kids are there which a normal government school would not do - from her/Jagriti observations, most government schools at primary school level are not imparting any education.

We reached Kalra-II school in a short while. Vijaya didi explained that she had met commissioner/DM etc and brick kiln owners association folks and brick kiln owners had agreed that they will provide 1-room school for the Apna School centers. While getting all of them to actually do that has not been easy and many have still not met that commitment, Kalra-II had provided a room for Apna School. The center had 24 children. The place was clean. They had constructed a garbage pale out of a carton. There were separate boys & girls urinals close by - this is worth noting because using nearby fields are the norm for the purpose and as I found out shortly, Apna School centers are trying to teach basic sanitation/hygiene to kids and their families - kids recited a poem which tells everyone to cover after defecating to prevent spread of disease. Kids also recited another poem on noise pollution, industrial pollution and negative effects of smoking. Overall, it was a pleasure to be at this center; the kids were all neat and clean and wearing their uniforms with name tags. The difference between kids at the school and a few I saw outside who apparently were not coming to schools was very substantial. Vijaya didi informed that they introduced uniforms and sweaters this year as another incentive for kids to attend school; afternoon meal funded by Mala Foundation is another incentive where they provide nutritious meal with veggies, protein etc when normal meal for these families is boiled rice with a vegetable available only for few days of the week.

The 24 students with approximately equal number of boys and girls were divided in groups of 8. The teacher at this center informed that 2 of the 3 groups was ahead - they were writing and counting up to 100 on their board work whereas the 3rd group was working towards 0-20 when we arrived. Next, kids from both the advanced and the behind groups recited poems - kids were enthusiastic and did not need prodding to recite - approx half of the kids recited poems. Next we saw an innovative game that Apna School had introduced to teach kids monetary skills - since one of the problems

faced by migrant workers is that they are shortchanged by the contractor/brick kiln owner. The teacher handed over a stack of monopoly-money to one kid and other rolled 3 dice, 2 of which returned numbers and the third returned '+' or '-'. The kid with the stack of money had to do the addition/subtraction of the numbers as appropriate and then hand over the right amount of money to the kid who rolled the dice. The kid receiving the money was supposed to count and make sure he was receiving the right amount of money. After few rounds, the cashier would change giving most of the kids a chance to play the role. On the table where kids were behind in counting, we played a memory game - this was similar to equivalent game with playing cards whereby small squares with numbers printed on the side facing down and nothing on side facing up. There were several pairs of cards with same numbers and kids task was to remember where they saw the same number earlier. Kids were participating enthusiastically even if with limited success.

That was about all the time we could spend at this center. I was impressed by the teacher who was very committed to the work he was doing. The teaching methods were innovative, effective and targeted to life skills.

Next school was in the interior area in Choubepur. Here also, the facility was clean and reasonably well maintained inside and out. There were an equal number of boys and girls all of whom were neat and clean wearing their school dress and sweaters that Apna School distributes to them. We spoke to the kids and their teacher and saw them do their work. After that we had a round of recitals where students recited, solo or in groups, poems on pollution, hygiene, good behavior; couple of them sang songs in their local language. Kids in this school seemed to be little behind in their level of learning than the Kalra bhatta school. Outside the school, we spoke to the teacher and I got to learn the challenges he has been facing. Parents have minimal interest in kids coming to school, not every school-age kid in the brick kiln comes to school, and he has to go around and gather all the kids every morning and bring them to school - everyday he spends 2 hours before school starts in working with parents to get the kids to take bath, wear clean clothes, comb hair and then get them to the school. The difference between the kids that were coming to school and those who were not was apparent so I have to conclude that (i) the difference is in parents' background and (ii) we are making some difference even if the circumstances are challenging. As we were leaving, Vijaya didi spoke to some of the kids we saw as not attending and asked them reasons for not coming to school. Then she asked for their parents and some of them came. While some made other excuses, others were unfortunately adamant that there is no need and that if they go to school who will do the work at home and, for some of the kids, who will earn the money needed to feed the family. It was an unfortunate reality and a reminder of the inflationary pressures putting kids out of school that Vijaya-di was telling me about as we were starting the trip. I, personally, was somewhat saddened by my helplessness in the situation but Vijaya-di soldiered on pleading the parents to spare an hour and send the kids for that one hour and that we will provide one meal and that, no matter whether they were not coming because of house work or work in brick kiln, they can spare at least one hour.

All in all, I have to say that Jagriti/Apna School is putting in significant amount of effort in making a difference in life of these kids and their families and, while challenges are daunting, they are making a difference and deserve our continued financial support.



Walls inside school have education charts and kids work, kids using blackboards.



Kids playing the money counting game



Kids learning counting using counting aids; same cards used for memory game.



Kalra-II school building; group photo w/ kids, teacher, Vijaya-di & local women



Choubepur school (top); teacher having kids do some work as Vijaya-di & I look on



Choubepur school kids reciting poems



Choubepur school group photo (top) and kids interacting with me



Vijaya-di asking out-of-school kids (bottom) & their parents (top) to come to school