



Ideas that Drive Asha

(My Perspective - Rajaram)

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Volunteers derive no financial benefit from Asha. In fact most volunteers who can afford it do not even get their expenses reimbursed. Volunteers manage projects, accounts, hiring, fundraising etc.

Pros

- Very frugal, lean organisation with very low overheads.
- Accountability and transparency built in. Details available to the volunteers also made available to the donors.
- Access to talents far beyond what we can afford to pay for.

Cons

- People driving the organisation are mostly from the Privileged Elite class of Indians.
- Builds a hierarchy in the organisation. A firm ceiling for the growth of the staff.
- Difficult when volunteers are not pulling their weight in some area. Staff suffer for that and have no recourse.

Working with Government Schools and Balwadis

We work with government schools and Balwadis because,

- Every country that has a good education system has been able to accomplish that primarily through a good public education system. We believe quality education for everyone is an essential prerequisite for an egalitarian society.
- These are the educational institutions that reach all the people in Tamilnadu and the coverage is greater than 90%. These are the primary institutions that provide education to the poor, esp. in rural areas. It cannot and does not deny admission to anyone.
- There is a social consensus that good education should be provided to all irrespective of their caste, economic status etc. Our efforts to assist the schools has found support from citizens, school officials and concerned government officials.
- Our involvement and success so far continues to give us hope that there are motivated people in these organizations and our involvement can improve things.

Private Schools:

- Private schools makes the society unequal. In society riven by caste and religion, it further accentuates that division. Govt schools tend to be much more blind to caste, religion etc. esp in a state like TN.
- Private schools are more focussed on certification than true education as this is what parents evaluate them by. Spreading good education cannot happen without strong govt involvement.
- In our assessments we have seen that the private school students' better performance can be wholly explained by higher education level of the parents.
- Organisations like Education Initiatives argue for Charter Schools model. This too doesnt work in poorer areas, remote rural areas etc. Most arguments against private schools also apply for charter schools.

Non-Formal Education Centres:

- These are infrastructure outside of the school system that provide what is missed in the school. To some extent Asha's own RTCs and libraries may be viewed as NFE++ centres.
- Where possible, it is best to work within the schooling system. And the schooling system welcomes our engagement with them.

Modes of Engaging with Govt Schools

Regular Teacher Provide a teacher to the school to work alongside the govt teachers. Needed in schools with low teacher-student ratio. But doesn't help improve the educational level much as often the problems are bad curriculum, bad pedagogy and bad goals/monitoring.

Providing Materials We never do that in isolation. It is always in combination with providing teachers. We have in our experience found that providing bigger infrastructures to the school without constant support and oversight doesn't help much.

Program Teachers Our computer teachers are an example of this model. They go to school to teach specific things as per our own curriculum/pedagogy. This is working very well. Experimenting that for English with KaradiPath.

Models/Tools/Ideas We have created Asha Kanini which can be used by any govt school. Similarly our assessment framework can potentially be used by the govt. Our CS curriculum, pedagogy etc. are also formalised for use by others. But adoption by govt poses difficult challenges. We have struggled when we got some opportunities as well. Continuing to work on this.

Secularism Asha is staunchly secular. We take effort to ensure feelings of caste / religion doesn't creep into our staff/volunteers. Many of our staff are Dalits. But good number of forward and other backward castes are also well-represented. Hiring from local areas and paying market wages ensures good mix in our staff.

Egalitarianism We believe in equal opportunities for all and also that this cannot be achieved in a very unequal society. Most of our programs are aimed at the poor and the weakest communities/geographies. We shun gifted-child kind of programs.

Socialism We think a democratic government is best equipped to provide basic essentials for the population at large in a fair manner. Thus our support for govt schools. We work through govt programs where possible and make it accessible to all people.

I hear two counter-positions to our work.

Shouldnt education enable a student to obtain jobs? What is the point if it doesnt?

I believe education is beyond that. Learning has a value in itself. Also for a society as a whole, educating its members is critical for its growth. Good education will also lead to employment and material betterment, but that should not be the direct goal of education.

Is an education that does not help students see the inequalities in the world or the huge damage man is wreaking on the environment or ... (insert your favourite “value” here) of any use?

I think basic value-free 3Rs of education is indeed of great value. One needs to be patient. In the long run basic understanding of Maths and language skills is what a society uses as tools to understand the universe, the human society and everything in it. Basic education will eventually drive social change.

At Asha, we view our role as an organization that is working towards social change and not as a charitable organisation.

Charity There is a giver and there is a receiver with the giver imposing conditions on the receiver. Receiver is expected to feel grateful to the giver.

Social Change Working for social change, improves the system so that the whole society benefits. Receiver is receiving from the society what is theirs as a fundamental right.

Education is a fundamental right and getting it shouldn't depend on the charity of individuals.

This impacts our work in various ways,

1. Focus on improving quality of education at government schools.
2. Even where we provide scholarships, to the extent possible do not use performance as a criteria for selection or continuation. There is no obligation imposed on the children to “do good to the society” or “return the help they have received”.

Creating a single instance of good education is itself challenging. But creating a model that can scale up is even more challenging.

Scaling involves formalising the curriculum, pedagogy, method of delivering the education, processes for monitoring/evaluation of outcomes etc, We spend a significant amount of time in formalising our methods.

Scaling does not mean one-size-fits-all education. The curriculum, pedagogy and method of delivery should all have sufficient flexibility in them to adjust itself for a wide range of abilities, interests, etc. This is what good scaling is all about.

Instances of Asha efforts to scale:

1. Asha Kanini, CS Curriculum and Asha Computer Teachers. These started in Thiruvallur with a couple of teachers and less than 10 schools but has scaled up to reach 150 schools in TN and also 9 schools in UP. Many chapters of Asha and other organisations are keen to adopt this.
2. Working on good scalable model for English education with Karadi Path. KaradiPath is already a mature well formalised product. We are adopting the method to server the small rural schools.
3. Asha is also looking at formalising the curriculum, pedagogy and method of delivery at our RTCs.

What Impacts Learning?

Factors that impact Learning:

1. Natural ability of the child.
2. Inputs provided by the teacher/school.
3. Curriculum / pedagogical approach which are often not under the control of the school.
4. Sociological factors like nutrition, parents education, value / role models for education in the community, money which provides a space for learning, etc.

Natural Ability – Tendency in India to attribute performance to talent (born-with) even when skill (trained/acquired) can sufficiently explain it. All gifted-child program and subsidising education for the gifted operate with this assumption. At Asha we resist this.

Sociological Factors are often missed out blaming just the schools for the poor performance of the children. Often this is deliberate. Like here in . Deliberate because they can blithely then say that private schools are better because their children do better. Factors like parental education, nutrition and health of the children, just the material well-being of the family have huge bearing on learning outcomes. Our assessments help us understand this better.

Quality of the Teacher: We have time and again seen that good teachers can overcome the restrictions imposed by the curriculum, pedagogical methods and the sociological factors of the children to actually do a wonderful job teaching the children. They inspire us to continue our work.

Biggest problem confronting education in TN and India is rote learning. Building conceptual clarity is the biggest challenge. Broad pedagogical approaches that takes us towards this characterise our efforts.

Learn by Doing (or)
Concrete before
Abstract

Our Maths training from introduction of numbers uses this approach. Our lesson plans drive this message by emphasising classroom activities and stories. Our computer curriculum and teacher training emphasises that. Teachers do not ask students to take notes and memorise keys or acronyms. KaradiPath program is also a step in this direction.

Goal Oriented
Learning

In our computer science teaching (in schools and in RTCs), significant portion of time is devoted to project work. Children learn far better when it is towards something that fits into a broader project they are working on. Works far better than teacher driven instruction.

Holistic / Joyful
Learning

Where we have the possibility we provide ways to incorporate craft, songs and dance into the children's schooling. We emphasise these in our libraries as well. Our support for school day functions, excursions contribute in an intangible way to their education as well.

Many alternative approaches to using technology in education exist. These are often overlapping but with big independent areas of operations.

PAL or Personalised Assistive Learning

Children learn on their own through a curriculum fed to them by a computer. The PAL system learns about the student's level and gives appropriate lessons, worksheets etc.

We do not find this meaningful for younger (classes 1 to 8) children and especially with illiterate parents and from communities where role models for higher education do not exist. This objection applies to most models of self-learning.

TAL or Technology Aided Learning

Teacher uses technology to improve how things are taught in class. Our Asha Kanini is very much a TAL product. We see great potential for this. But large scale deployment poses great challenges.

Data Analytics

Good simple assessment plus sociological data and lots of analytics offers great potential for understanding education. ASER is a good example. Asha's own assessments and analytics hope to take this further.

Teaching Technology

While technology can be used to teach all subjects, teaching technology to children in itself is also extremely important. We teach both digital literacy and programming to school children. While importance of digital literacy is well understood, importance of programming less so. But the advantages of unambiguous communication, ability to recursively decompose problems, ability to separate data and information required for a problem etc. are very useful skills. Research also backs the same. As Profs in other dept at IITM point out to me, technology is not only computer science. But we are now only dealing with Computer Science!

Teacher Training / Resources

Training at the point of use is always useful. Providing instructions and resources required to teach a lesson can have tremendous impact on education. Asha Kanini aims for this as well. Further teacher training online is another important way to use technology.

MOOCS

Important at higher levels (college) but not at school level.

Virtual or Hybrid Learning

Once again for younger children in the poorer strata with parents who are not well educated, this is a complete non-starter as our govt's dabbling with this during the Corona break amply proved.