

Shiksha Kendra Program

DPS-Vasant Kunj

Commitment to Hope

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This report contains Initial perceptions of the Shiksha Kendra program at Delhi Public School (DPS) -Vasant Kunj. These perceptions are based on classroom observations, interviews and discussions with teachers, students, parents of children in the DPS mainstream(morning) program, parents of children in the Shiksha Kendra Program, the Administrator of the program and the Principal of DPS Vasant Kunj. These activities were conducted in January and February, 2009, Delhi Public School - Vasant Kunj.

Overview of The Shiksha Kendra Program

The Shiksha Kendra program at DPS-Vasant Kunj was started in 2003 and is one of a number of such programs operated with the Society's schools. The program at DPS-Vasant Kunj is the only Shiksha Kendra program that focuses exclusively on the education of girls from marginalized sections of Indian society (the others focus on both boys and girls). This focus on girls is based on a basic belief that if you educate a 'girl child' you educate a family. This belief was reiterated by teachers, the Administrator

and the Principal. The program currently has 220 students from Class Prep to Class 6. The program at DPS-Vasant Kunj appears to have a very committed and capable Administrator and dedicated teachers. The students are very motivated and enthusiastic. Being under the umbrella of the DPS Society provides a strong infrastructure. The program focuses on a high quality curriculum, manners/etiquette, hygiene and becoming good citizens. All teaching/educational resources, uniforms and transportation are provided for by DPS. There is little external commitment to the program, on the part of the parents, aside from paying minimal fees (50 rupees for tuition; 50 rupees for bus service which is paid quarterly). The basic goal is literacy, being able to read and write with understanding (this includes both Hindi and English) and supporting the girls up to and including graduation from class 12. While these goals were articulated through interviews with teachers and the Administrator of the program they do not appear to be formalized.

Resilience and the Shiksha Kendra Program

Resilience is a process that includes adaptation despite significant risk or adversity (Luthar, 2000). In this context, we are addressing resilience of children. Adversities can include anything that is expected to impede or affect functioning and development of a child. Research has shown that these adversities may include but are not limited to maltreatment, parental illness or psychopathology, premature birth, parental divorce, homelessness and poverty. In order to gain admission into the Shiksha Kendra Program the girls are from “marginalized sections of society”, which

has been defined, by the Administrator, as those of weaker socioeconomic status (i.e. live in poverty). As poverty has continually been shown to be a risk factor for negative developmental outcomes, both physically and psychologically, it is important to address how to assuage the effects of this factor on children's development. One way to protect a child is to eliminate the poverty and its associated risks (poorer health, less access to quality medical care, under nutrition or malnutrition, lack of educational opportunities, underemployment or unemployment, increased risk of witnessing or being a victim of violence, etc). While this is laudable, it takes a great deal of time, likely over many generations to reduce poverty in societies like India. This reality was acknowledged by the Administrator, teachers and parents when they articulated that the effect of the education of the girls in this program may be even more significant for the next generation who will benefit from their mothers having been educated. A more immediate and plausible way to support the development of a child who lives in poverty is to encourage and support, to the extent possible, the individual characteristics within the child and characteristics outside the child (family, relationships and community) that appear to be protective factors which assist children in times of risk or crises. Educational programs, like the Shiksha Kendra Program, may provide the opportunity for children who live in poverty to develop individual characteristics, relationships and be a part of a community that supports their development.

Based on observations and interviews, initial impressions are that the Shiksha Kendra program appears to be doing an excellent job of developing those individual characteristics that have been shown to assist children in successfully negotiating

through adversities. These characteristics include good problem-solving skills and attentional skills, positive self-perceptions and self-efficacy (feelings that one is capable and competent), hope and a sense of meaning in life, a positive outlook on life, good self-regulation of emotional impulses, talents valued by self and society and adaptability (Masten & Reed, 2005). While close relationships with parents is clearly a protective factor for children, research has found that having close relationships with competent, prosocial and supportive adults and connections to prosocial and rule-abiding peers has been found to be just as effective protections for children facing adversities (Werner & Smith, 2001). During interviews with girls in the program and during multiple observations it is clear that the teachers are highly respected by the girls and are seen as people they can trust and turn to in order to help them solve problems. Also, time and time again, the girls talked about how much they valued their school friends, the majority of whom appear to be clearly rule-abiding and demonstrate many prosocial behaviours including sharing, being compassionate towards others and elder students being protective of younger students. This social network and support is an excellent resource for these girls. Shiksha Kendra is a also part of the larger DPS community that provides effective education, high levels of safety, and health support, all of which are also important for successful developmental outcomes for children.

One common element among those who overcome adversity and that which separates them from children who become victims of adversity is the concept of HOPE; a concept that can be defined as seeing potential for the future. It appears on first blush that the Shiksha Kendra program is providing a situation where girls are seeing potential

for their future. The key message is that the girls can be in charge of their future, they can become independent and they will not have to rely on others. They can be teachers, doctors, or engineers. Interviews with girls in the program confirm that this is their view of their future. The parents of some of these girls also expressed similar beliefs.

The message of hope permeates DPS Vasant Kunj as a whole, whether it be in publications, media releases, displays of trophies, scholar ceremonies, ceremonies recognizing the successes and potentials of their students in terms of their future goals and occupations. Given the significant role that hope plays in the educational environment at DPS, a question needs to be addressed when it comes to the Shiksha Kendra program; a program that the Principal, Administrator, teachers and students of the program are clearly proud of. Could the DPS, in their efforts to meet their commitments to provide an education for marginalized children in their society, be providing hope to the girls of the Shiksha Kendra program that has a small chance of being realized? Based on discussions with the Administrator and the Principal, there appears to be a true commitment to making sure all the girls in the program will have a place in class 9 of the morning program if they so desire. In order to fulfill this commitment, the program is limiting enrolment to no more than 30 students a year as this number of students can be accommodated within the existing structure of the DPS-Vasant Kunj mainstream program. Further discussions also implied that their commitment may not end at class 12 but that they may try to assist the girls to post secondary educational opportunities, although the details were not specifically

articulated. One issue that also needs to be addressed is whether the girls may be able to gain admission into another program if for some reason they need to leave DPS (for example if the family relocates to a new area). Has the Shiksha Kendra program ensured that the children will meet the qualifications for a state certificate to gain admission into class 9 elsewhere? If not, might some girls lose the opportunity for further education?

The afternoon program uses a modified version of the current curriculum of the morning program. If, in fact, a goal is to move the students into the morning program, then preparation is necessary and the society needs to maximize the opportunities for success in those senior classes in the morning program. However, there are some vast differences between the afternoon students' experience and the morning students' experience. These differences may decrease the chances that the Shiksha Kendra girls will move beyond their program.

The morning program runs from 7:45-1:45 (6 hours). The afternoon program runs from 1:50-4:50 (3 hours). Clearly if similar curriculum is being used how does the program deal with the fact that they have half of the time to cover the necessary curriculum which forms the basis for education in the upper classes? In addition, the morning students learn how to deal with the stress and pressure of a highly competitive educational system from their teachers and parents. Based on interviews and observations it appears that the afternoon girls are not pressured by their teachers or their parents. The teachers do not expect the girls to do much in the way of homework

other than reviewing what they did in the class that day, primarily due to the fact that the parents of these girls are illiterate and therefore cannot provide assistance. So not only are the girls not getting as much classroom time, but they are not getting the homework that the morning students are getting. This further decreases the time spent on basic curriculum. In addition, the morning children are used to being in a school with 4,000 other children whereas the total afternoon number of students is approximately 220. The experiences of the Shiksha Kendra girls may not adequately prepare them for the pressurized, competitive and work intensive environment of the morning program.

This program, which was successfully launched in 2003 and has been successful in providing a good education for these girls in the primary grades, now needs to consider what efforts are necessary to increase the chances of a successful transition of the Shiksha Kendra girls into the Class 9 of the morning program. The current cohort is transitioning into class 7 within the next month. It may now be the time to focus on starting that transition by exposing the girls to some of the pressures that those in the morning program are experiencing including exposure to the same exams within the same time periods. This would allow the girls the opportunity to build the skills and tools that they will need in order to deal with the pressures rather than protecting the girls from them and subsequently exposing them to challenges for which they are woefully unprepared. The following is a list of recommendations to the Shiksha Kendra program which serve to increase the chances that the Shiksha Kendra girls meet their goals of graduation from class 12.

Recommendations

Given the commitment of DPS to the Shiksha Kendra program, it appears that some issues need to be addressed if DPS wants to commit to realistic hope for these girls. Clearly, the curriculum piece needs to be addressed. There is a core curriculum that needs to be covered in the earlier grades in order to be successful later on. The challenge of covering core curriculum within an abbreviated time commitment is very real. It is not clear whether the base curriculum that is necessary for movement into higher grades has been clearly articulated. The charitable nature of the Shiksha Kendra program puts it at risk in relation to the curriculum issue. It is plausible that some may take the position that for these girls an abbreviated curriculum coverage is adequate as the alternative may likely be none. DPS needs to ensure that this position does not find traction. Efforts need to be made to ensure that the curriculum that is covered will prepare them in a manner comparable to the students in the morning program.

In addition, there needs to be a firm commitment on the part of the DPS society to ensure that high quality teachers are attracted to these teaching positions, especially given the multiple challenges with meeting the high standards of DPS with a modified curriculum. While it is commendable that some high quality teachers are motivated to teach in the Shiksha Kendra program out of compassion rather than any financial motive, the society cannot assume that this will always be the case. If the teachers have similar qualifications as teachers in the morning program, they need to be compensated accordingly. While the Shiksha Kendra Program is a social commitment

of the DPS society, it cannot expect the teachers to accept wages that are not commensurate with that of their equally qualified peers.

Based on observations, it appears that the teachers in this program play multiple roles including teacher, counsellor and advisor. It may be beneficial for both teachers and students to have someone in an advisor/counsellor role who could advise the senior girls in terms of what curriculum they need to have covered in order to proceed, study skills, stress management strategies, etc. Again, recognizing time is limited, the 30 - 45 minutes that they are at school before class starts may be a time period in which these services could be accessed. The Administrator commented they have been considering having someone within the Shiksha Kendra program act as a mentor/liaison for the girls. This mentor/liaison would be available to help the girls deal with any problems they are having in the new program and help them communicate with their teachers. Perhaps the advisor/counsellor that has been mentioned in a preventative role could be the mentor or liaison once the girls have moved into class 9.

Based on interviews with some of the Shiksha Kendra girls it appears that some of these girls are accessing tutors outside of school. This perhaps provides the opportunity for some of these girls to cover the curriculum that they need. Although, it is not clear who these tutors are or how qualified they are to tutor. Access to tutor services (or even peer tutors from the morning program) could certainly be a contributing factor to the potential successes of the Shiksha Kendra girls. Tutors/mentors, especially for those in class 6, 7 & 8, that are hired (or at a minimum

vetted) by the program would help to ensure that the tutorials that the girls are receiving are related to the information they need to be successful and prepared for in the higher classes.

It is the understanding of the researcher that the girls may be enrolled in their own section of class 9, thereby giving the girls the extra support of the peers that they have been with throughout their educational career and protecting them from potential prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts of other students who may not be from the marginalized sections of society. There are two alternatives to take when it comes to enrolling the Shiksha Kendra girls in class 9. One is to follow the aforementioned path, where the protection of the welfare of the girls appears to be the top priority. On the other hand, might it be feeding into the status quo of keeping 'marginalized' children marginalized? Another alternative is integration, rather than segregation, which may be the first step in teaching tolerance and understanding. Currently, approximately 20% of the student population of the morning program is from the marginalized sections of society. Is there any indication that prejudice and discrimination is being experienced by this 20%? While there is an acknowledgement on the part of the researcher that cultural mores may be a significant challenge, the placement of the girls in a separate section needs to be carefully considered, especially if those girls become involved in any other school activities, teams, etc. where they will be interacting with peers from the morning program. If the girls do end up in integrated classes then taking small steps towards more interaction now would be of obvious benefit. Based on observation of the Shiksha Kendra program, that there is presently little to no interaction with children

or teachers in the morning program except for those girls who have siblings in the morning program. In order to ease the transition into the morning program it may be beneficial to plan some mutual activities. This could take the form of a buddy system where the morning and the afternoon girls get a chance to meet, interact, and perhaps work on some kind of superordinate goals (even for a ½ hour after the morning session and before the afternoon session). This will go a long way in providing a social connection between the girls which will decrease the chances of the Shiksha Kendra girls remaining “marginalized” and separate when they do enter the morning program. The researcher acknowledges that cultural norms around interaction between individuals of different economic backgrounds and caste issues may represent a significant hurdle to this alternative.

Clearly there is a great deal of participation in school activities among the children in the morning program from designing bulletin boards, contributing to and being recognized in DPS publications, participating in assemblies and scholar recognition ceremonies. While the Shiksha Kendra Program does have their own acknowledgment ceremonies, certificates, etc, and clearly they are proud of their achievements, perhaps being part of morning DPS ceremonies and publications on a regular basis (while maintaining their unique celebrations as well-especially if parents may be intimated to attend larger functions and ceremonies) will assist the girls in feeling like they play a significant role in the school and increase their motivation and adaptation to a new program. It may also enhance the awareness, understanding and sense of a larger school body on the part of students in the day program.

The recommendations put forth so far assume that the girls will be moving into the morning program after class 8. It appears from interviews and information about social mores, religious and cultural traditions, and attitudes towards son/daughter educational expectations and opportunities that not all girls will go beyond class 8. Acknowledging this possibility, it may be beneficial for DPS to partner with or have an agreement with a vocational school with a similar reputation to DPS in terms of quality standards. This agreement would, at a minimum, allow the girls admission into the program after class 8. Ideally, but perhaps logistically unwieldy, DPS would cover tuition up to the cost that is commensurate with the cost of DPS-morning program admissions.

While it may be easier to access information and documentation on the progress of the mainstream program at DPS, it is not as easy to access information on the Shiksha Kendra program. There is no information on the main page of the DPS webpage about the Shiksha Kendra program. While it appears that administration and teachers are proud of the program (based on interviews), this pride is not reflected in public documentation of this program. Indeed, the information for this report was gathered from interviews rather than any official documentation. These interviews confirmed that such documentation does not exist. It is recommended that the Society begin to document the program, including clearly articulated goals and strategies for the program. As importantly, the Society should also document and share the success stories of the Shiksha Kendra students. They should be highlighted not unlike the successes of the children in the morning program which are readily available. While it is

acknowledged that every Shiksha Kendra program is unique, the basic goal of supporting education of the children is not. If the society could collect data from all the Shiksha Kendra programs this would be a substantial body of data that would prove useful for program development and monitoring.

If DPS wanted to begin a program evaluation and monitoring, the data that would be necessary to collect would need to include at a minimum:

- Norm-based achievement scores by grade and subject
- A comparison of the scores with other Shiksha Kendra programs and a comparison of the scores with the mainstream DPS program
- Retention data
- Number of students transferring into day program
- Outcomes/information for those students that do not proceed with their education at DPS

From the perspective of resilience this program holds a great deal of promise. The Resilience Research Lab in the Department of Psychology at Vancouver Island University, from which this researcher originates, is committed to research that seeks to understand resilience with a community and cultural context and provide information and recommendations for communities to foster protective factors in the lives of children and youth in order for normal development to occur. It is with this in mind that the

researcher has been consulting with a local professor from the Department of Education at the University of Delhi. Professor Alka Sehgal has expressed an interest in developing a research partnership to study the impact of this program over time. Having the interest of two university institutions , one local and one international speaks to the potential of this program.

Whether the aforementioned recommendations or a potential longitudinal study come to fruition is dependent upon a commitment on the part of DPS to the education of these girls. If the society determined that it would like to proceed, a number of steps would be required in order for the research to commence. These steps would include approval of the board of the Delhi Public School Society, formalizing a research partnership between Vancouver Island University, the University of Delhi and Delhi Public School Society, gauging interest by senior students at the University of Delhi and Vancouver Island University to be involved in data collection and analysis, approval of the Resilience Research Lab Advisory Board and ethical approval by Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board.

DPS-Vasant Kunj has made a true commitment to provide an education for girls from marginalized sections of society but beyond this they have fostered a sense of hope in these girls. These girls face the challenges and risks of living in poverty, yet they have hope for their future. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, “hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today.”

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