

SRCT report

I visited the Saidapet Corporation School, which is the primary school where SRCT conducts its educational programs, along with Padmini Gopalan and Bama Seshadri of SRCT. In this school, SRCT supports the Balwadis (essentially a crèche for children aged 2-4) and kindergarten (KG) classes by providing teachers and teacher assistants. There are 4 sections of Balwadi and 8 sections of KG in the school with about 20 children in each class. The student population in Balwadi fluctuates a lot since sometime many parents bring their children to be taken care of and the Corporation cannot turn them away.

All the classes are taught using the Montessori system. The classes have all the Montessori teaching materials such as blocks, puzzles, objects for learning to count, etc. The children largely decide what activities to pursue – the teachers and teacher assistants help them as needed, either to help them in a specific activity (e.g. pouring water into a container) or to gently nudge towards some activity if they are listless. I noticed that many of the children were very absorbed in their tasks and did not even look up or around. It was quite amazing to see the 3-5 year-olds in almost every classroom sitting quietly focused on their tasks and not running around or being disruptive. I was also struck by how organized the classrooms were and the cleanliness in the classrooms and the student population.

A teacher or teacher assistant would go around answering questions or simply observing them. The children are in class from 9 in the morning until 3 pm. Other than 15-20 minutes of joint activity at the beginning of the day, the children are left to themselves to pursue whatever interests them. The teaching materials are all around them, neatly organized, and there are also alphabets, numbers, etc. written on the blackboard. Some of them were copying these alphabets or numbers. They learn words and language through phonetics. The primary emphasis is on English language rather than Tamil because that is the desire of the parents.

The Corporation provides all the teaching materials and a teacher for each class. What SRCT does is to arrange for additional teachers and teacher assistants to provide individual attention to the students. Further, SRCT employs a teacher's teacher called Vidya who trains all the other teachers as they are inducted into the school. This is crucial given that many of them are not entirely comfortable with the Montessori system and naturally gravitate towards "teaching" the students and controlling their activities to an extent. The Corporation does provide some Montessori training at the beginning but it is not sufficient and hence they get significant in-the-classroom training.

One of the significant achievements of SRCT has been to convince the Chennai Corporation to adopt the Montessori system in all its school and they have gradually been implementing in this. While the Montessori system has been adopted in Balwadis and kindergarten, an activity based learning approach has been implemented in elementary school, which is similar in spirit to Montessori system. So, there are no exams and the learning is more unstructured. However, I think there are challenges in the elementary school. I visited the 1st grade class in the Saidapet School and gathered that there were 45 students to a class. Also, there is only one teacher per class. So, I am not to what extent the Montessori system can be pursued successfully in that setting with such limited resources. I found less order in the 1st grade class and because the

regular teacher had gone for training that day and the principal was substituting (while attending to other tasks), the students were not doing much. I think one of the challenges here is that the students are going abruptly from a resource-rich environment (with 2-3 teachers + teacher assistants) in Balwadi and KG to a resource-poor environment in 1st grade. So, I am a bit concerned that some of the foundational learning built in Balwadi and KG may be lost when they enter 1st grade. If the allocation of teachers were up to me (in such a resource-constrained environment), I would reassign some of the teachers from the kindergarten to 1st grade classes.

Overall, the education provided with the support of SRCT at this school is very good and it is an excellent learning environment with dedicated and caring teachers. I think SRCT could expand their activities further at both the Saidapet school as well as other schools but they will require additional resources and will have to hire high quality teachers and train them appropriately.