

Visit to Chennai Middle School (Corporation school) in MGR Nagar (supported by SRCT)

I visited the school on Dec 11 morning along with Bharathi Chandru and Jayanthi Karthikeyan. I met with the headmistress, one of the senior SRCT teachers at the school and visited several classrooms – LKG/UKG as well as 3rd and 4th grade. SRCT primarily focuses on KG and 1st grade classes at this school, providing additional teachers and a helper to the corporation teacher. Teach for India has several classrooms wherein their teachers work together with the corporation teachers. I spoke to a couple of the Teach for India teachers too – both in their twenties. A couple of pictures and key observations follow.



Key observations

- **Background:** About 200 kids in LKG/UKG (mixed) and in 1st grade with 4 sections of 25 kids per section in each grade. The school goes until 8th grade. Many Corporation schools go until 10th or 12th but this school has space limitations due to which they are unable to add more grades.
- **Parents:** The parents of the children are typically daily wage earners and they estimate that several kids (about 15%) are in single parent (only mother) households because the father is often missing – due to alcohol issues. So the parents are keen to drop off the kids by 7:30-8 am and sometimes they stay until 5:30 or 6 pm in school (even though school hours are much shorter) because the parents cannot return on time. A teacher and the watchman keep an eye. Interestingly, this is an English medium school even though the kids come from families where the parents do not know much English. But they are keen to have the kids go to English medium schools. I get the feeling English medium schools also get better resources (from Corporation as well as SRCT, Teach for India, etc.). Parents not knowing English is a drawback because the kids cannot converse in English with anyone at home. The Teach for India teachers who were teaching 5th and 6th grade kids commented that the kids are highly motivated and bright but the lack of follow-up at home (since the parents are typically not well educated) hurts them.
- **Support from Corporation:** They all get books, uniforms, etc. free from the Corporation. In addition, there is access to free meals but only about 30% of the parents take advantage of it because they want to provide their own meals to their child. The Corporation also provides

incentives to children who do well in high school and are willing to go to college by providing partial or full tuition.

- **Classrooms and teachers:** The classrooms are well organized and neat. Most kids are working by themselves as in a Montessori system – playing with puzzles, block, learning numbers and addition, etc. using measuring scales, learning to write letters, identifying the names of various objects, etc. They also learn organization skills because they are taught to put back things, etc. In the kindergarten classes, there were two teachers and one helper for about 20-25 students. This is a very good ratio by any standard – probably better than even in the US. The teachers and helpers were working with the kids but the kids who were unsupervised were largely working on their own and several of them were quite focused on their tasks.
- **Outcome measurement:** There is some follow-up to check that the kids are learning. Surprisingly, even the kindergarten students have exams. Saw a sample exam and it was quite impressive – they had to identify and write names of objects in Tamil and English, there were questions on numbers and addition, etc. They have exams partly because parents want to know that their children are learning something and assess how they are doing in school and because the Corporation also wants to measure outcomes.
- **Facilities:** The school has some sports facilities like volleyball, kabaddi, etc. that don't require much equipment. The students have done well and won in inter-school competitions. The school has 3 computer labs and all the children learn to use computers and some basic software. There is a kitchen that provides the mid-day meals.
- **Corporation and SRCT:** Corporation is very happy with the Montessori system and while SRCT has partnered with them in about 10 schools, the Corporation itself has rolled it out across all the Corporation schools in the kindergarten and 1st grade levels. SRCT has played a role in the roll-out across the city. But most schools have typically one set of Montessori materials per classroom and this can be a limitation – unlike SRCT supported schools which have 3-4 sets of materials. Now, the State Govt. wants to roll out the Montessori system in other Government schools that are not in Chennai and has requested SRCT for their help in this.
- **Financial Support:** SRCT has financial support other than from CVI. In particular, Cognizant has supported them for many years. But many companies are willing to pay only for fixed costs (such as Montessori materials) but are not willing to pay for recurring expenses like teacher salaries. So they depend on CVI for teacher salaries. We (CVI) are supporting about 1/3rd of the classroom teacher and helper salaries.

Overall assessment

The money CVI provides to SRCT is being spent well as it goes towards teachers who can help the children at a formative stage. I also spoke to Bharati and Jayanthi as well as the headmistress about introducing chess in the school (to children 7 and older) as an after-school activity since many kids hang around after school. They seemed to be interested and said they will explore the idea and get back to us.