TEACHER IDENTITIES AND THEIR IDENTITY-WORK IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Teachers have their own personal and social identities. These identities interact, negotiate with each other in the struggle of forming a unified self. Organisational ideologies play a major role in the attempt of alignment of social and personal identities of teachers. This paper is the result of a study done in an alternative school in Gudalur District of Tamil Nadu that tried to understand the identity work done by the teachers. The strategies used by the teachers while doing the identity work are explored through observations and interviews with the teachers and the management. The findings show that majority of teachers are aligned with the organisational ideology, and, reinforce the assumption that 'the organisation being a normative one, based on a social purpose, the chances of teacher alignment is maximum'.

INTRODUCTION

Every teacher has a personal identity - the identity that the teacher has constructed for himself/herself from the accumulation of previous experiences in life. They have certain understandings about their roles, responsibilities and capacities as teachers. Apart from this, each teacher has a social identity - the identity that the society or the institution expects the teacher to hold. The personal and social identities need not be a single unified concept, it can be more complex than generally assumed. When there is a conflict between the personal and social identities (which need not be the case always), the teacher has to do lot of 'identity work'[i] to cope up with the school life. Understanding how teachers do this identity work will have great implications for the functioning and efficiency of the organisation.

The purpose of this study is to apprehend how different members of an organisation (an alternative school) align themselves to the ideology of the organisation, and to understand various strategies used by the members in order to attain this. What are the identity crises they undergo during this

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process? Have they resolved the conflict yet? What could be the implications of some of these findings for the organisation?

Teachers may or may not create a stable identity after resolving the conflicts between their personal and social identity, if there are any. They constantly negotiate with their selves in order to achieve this stability. This struggle may also be reflected in the way in which they organise their day-to-day work in the organisation. The study tries to understand how the identity work of the teacher is influenced by the practices in the organisation, and how it is affecting the teaching-learning strategies adopted by the teacher. The role of authority structure and motivation in realising organisational goals is enormous, since it helps us realise the optimum conditions to create and maintain organisations with minimal ramifications and maximum efficiency.

1. Background and Context

The fieldwork for the study was done in an Adivasi school, functioning under Viswa Bharathi Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) established in 1993. From 1996 the trust has started working explicitly for the children from Adivasi communities in the Gudalur block in Nilgiri District. Nilgiris is ethnically unique because of the presence of six so-called primitive tribes, namely Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, Kattunayakar, and an agricultural community called Badagas, in the district. In the school where I visited there were children from the Kurumba, Paniya and Kattunayaka communities. Their secluded lives from the other cultural groups have made them socio-economically and educationally different.

The VBVT is a sister Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) of Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD), established in 1985 in order to fight for the land rights of Adivasis. Vidyodaya, with community assistance, has been trying to establish a culturally appropriate curriculum in order to ensure good quality education for every Adivasi child. [ii] The school has a very strong social purpose for its existence, as the school website states, "Our community has for long been at the bottom of the social, economic and political pyramid of society. But now we wish to throw off the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness and assert ourselves through our children.[iii]"

The social identity in this report mainly refers to what the organisation demands from the teacher. What society thinks of the teacher is found not relevant in this context for two reasons - first, the organisational philosophy seems to be the guiding factor for the teachers here compared to what the

society thinks, and second, the Adivasi community is less informed and exposed to the idea of education itself. Even in case of non-tribal teachers, the demand of the organisation itself, compared to those by the society, seems to be the major social factor that influences their identity.

Since the school has a specific social purpose and follows a cultural curriculum, the perceptions, beliefs and identities of the teachers might be well-aligned with that of the organisation. And teachers may face less identity conflict. In that case, studying teacher identity in such an alternative curriculum school will help us understand how teachers align their goals and identity with that of the organisation and how the organisation inducts and aligns the members into the culture of the organisation.

2. Sample and Data Collection Methods

This study was undertaken by interacting with the teachers working in the Vidyodaya School, and by observing the teaching-learning processes. Sixteen of the permanent teachers (including teachers working in the Vidyodaya School and the SSA unit[iv] associated with it), and 11 teacher trainees were interviewed. Thus, a total of 27 members (teachers and prospective teachers) of the organisation were interviewed and observed. The findings and inferences are based on the interactions with teachers and teacher trainees. The major data collection methods used were non-participant observation, and semi-structured interview.

2.1 Specific Questions in the Interview

I have tried to categorise the questions under three topics for convenience; but there are overlapping concerns across these three categories. During the research process questions were modified and rephrased wherever required.

2.1.1 To Understand Micro Interactions in Classroom

I.   How do you manage the situation when a child is not at all interested in learning?

II.   Why do you think some children respond better in the classroom?

III.   Are children naturally curious to learn and inquire?

IV.   Do you think urban children are more intelligent than rural children?

V.   When I worked as a teacher, I have seen many children feeling bored and sleepy in the class, what do you think is the reason for this?

VI.   What strategies do you use to resolve conflicts among children in classroom?

VII. How often do you talk to children outside the classroom?

VIII. What do you talk about with the child, other than academic issues?

IX. What are the techniques you use to bring discipline in class? How do you manage 'naughty' children in class?

X. What do you do when a child asks you something in the classroom which you are not sure about?

XI. How do you motivate children to learn?

XII. When a child approaches you with some personal problem, how do you resolve it?

2.1.2 To Understand Personal and Social Identity

I. Why did you choose the teaching profession?

II. What do you think is the role of an ideal teacher/ideal school?

III. What are the challenges you face as a teacher in the society? How do other members of family or society look at the role of a teacher?

IV. What are the expectations of the tribal community from you in terms of their children's education?

V. Does your aspiration as a teacher match with the expectations of the community?

VI. What is the influence of a teacher in a child's life?

VII. How do you balance between your family life and professional life?

VIII. What are the three things which you have found interesting/ challenging in your career?

IX. What is important for a good teacher - skill, knowledge or attitude?

X. How do you manage, when the school or the community expects you to do something as a teacher and you don't like to do that?

2.1.3 To Understand the Relation between Teacher and Organisational Goals

I. What motivates you to work in this school or why do you chose to work in this school?

II. What changes has the school made in you as a teacher or what are the inputs you have received from the school?

III. Have you felt anytime that you could teach better in a 'normal' private school?

IV. Why did you feel that way?

V.   How does the school management support you emotionally?

VI.   What are the features of the cultural curriculum in the school?

VII.   Do you think that the tribal children can survive in the outer world when they are exposed only to cultural curriculum?

VIII.   Do you think the Adivasi community is different from urban society?

IX.   Do you interact with the families of children?

X.   How do you think education will help tribal children?

3. Theoretical Perspective

The members of any organisation are guided by the principles and ideology that the organisation believes in. Though the members might have their own spaces for their independent actions, much of this relies on the nature of the organisation as well. The efficiency of an organisation largely depends on the way in which it holds its members together. Especially in organisations such as schools, where efficiency cannot be just determined by the quantity of outputs, it is important to understand the socialisation processes involved.

The perception of teachers "as ordinary employees, who are expected to do what the school's authorities want them to do" or " as driven by the meaning of their work and actively pursuing better communication with students" as Madan explains, will have large impact on the identity work done by the teacher (Madan 2012). How well the identity of teachers can align with that of the organisations also depends on the strategies adopted by the organisation to facilitate the same. Especially when the teachers have to 'reconstruct their identities' (Woods and Jeffrey 2002), organisational strategies gain more significance. How does this reformation of identity in the organisation impact the teaching-learning process? Does a teacher continue to pursue one's own 'lion tamer'[2], 'entertainer'[3] or 'romanticist'[4] notion of teacher as explained by Hargreaves (1975) irrespective of the organisational ideology? Or does the socialisation in the organisation change those perceptions of teachers?

The interactions with the teachers brought out some patterns in the responses that could be broadly classified into six categories for the purpose of analysis.

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[2]*Lion tamer is the teacher who is very strict and thinks that the teacher is the expert. Such a teacher gets the child to learn by coercive methods.*

[3]*Entertainers are teachers who adopt a variety of teaching methods in order to make the children learn. These teachers do not believe in the natural curiosity of the learner.*

[4]*Romanticist teachers are the ones who give spaces for negotiations in the classroom, and trust the capabilities of children.*

But one should see these variations as overlapping shades of the same continuum. Addressing teachers in this report as 'lion tamer', 'romantics' or 'entertainer' is done only as an approximation.

3.1 Self-reflective Teachers / Romantics

This category of teachers is very self-reflective. They have thought about life and its meaning well before they have become part of the organisation. They do not see any transition or identity crisis after coming to school because it was a deliberate choice to become part of the school, and to lead a reflective life as they had envisioned earlier. They do much less identity work in the organisation. They are actually not bothered about how society perceives the role of a teacher.

The ideology of the institution is directly linked to their head and heart. And hence they are able to make a third person analysis about their own activities and that of the organisation. This is reflected in their interactions with the children as well. They consider children as independent thinkers who are capable and responsible for their own learning. In the words of one of the teachers, "Anger is something which we create. You don't get angry with the child, even if he does not learn because you are interested in the child and not just in the delivery of content. This is not idealistic; it is possible when one has an open mind."

3.2 'Teaching' - "something new in life"

These are teachers for whom teaching is/was the best survival option available. Most of the young Adivasi teachers who are undergoing rigorous, two-years' long teacher training in the institution come under this category. Before coming here they were either at home or doing daily wage labour since they had very minimal formal educational qualifications. This is the first time they are understanding how a teacher should be, and they all have internalised the model of the teacher presented to them.

There is less identity work here, since, in the first place, there was no previous model of a teacher in their minds to have a conflict with. Moreover, because of all of their bitter experiences with their own teachers in school, they accept the present school philosophy with much more ease and comfort. The identity formation due to the impact of their own community members is very thin, because their communities are isolated from the mainstream communities, and, most of them are the first generation learners. What motivates them to work is the 'community feeling' towards the children of their own tribe.

3.3 Lion Tamer Model is the Most Efficient One, "but not now"

These are teachers who were working in other private schools mostly as 'lion tamers' before, and thought that to be the right role and responsibility of a teacher. They had never thought of changing the identity. But after coming to Vidyodaya they realised that the "the romantic figure" of a teacher gets more love, respect and trust from children by observing other teachers.

The shift to the new model of teaching is not a very difficult one. Less identity work is done though they struggled a little in the initial days. A teacher says, "Earlier I used to carry a stick in my hands everyday, but here in this school children sit on my lap. I never thought I would change so much."

3.4 Identity Conflict in the Previous Work Places

This category has teachers who were working previously in other schools and were disturbed by those organisational ideologies. They could not find satisfaction in their previous work places, many being private schools. As one such teacher shared, "Here I feel it is my own school. I want to come to school everyday. We discuss with each other whatever problems there are." Vidyodaya's ideology is exactly what they expected from their job. Therefore, they need to do less identity work.

3.5 "I am still in identity crisis, but I can get along"

These are the teachers who have not changed their previous notions of a teacher as a 'lion tamer'. They are really struggling to adjust to the norms of the institution like "no punishment", "no silent, disciplined classrooms", "flexible examinations", and so on. Though they have not internalised the norms, they are not as reactionary now as they were in the beginning because the majority of the teachers are in alignment with the institution. One of them said, "They learn all cultural curriculum and all here, do you think they will remember the culture once they go out?"

They are doing enormous amount of identity work, but still feel ambiguous about this. However, there is apparent alignment to the ideology of the organisation. One of the teachers feels the following way: "Nobody scolds children here; the freedom given to children is too much. There are ways in which children should behave towards a teacher. In the beginning I used to tell this to all. But now I keep quiet, I just suppress my views. Every teacher believes that in the first batch of board examination children will do well. I will believe only after the results come. " This struggle could be seen in their classrooms as well.

3.6 Real Alignment, but only "Apparent"

This group of teachers are only apparently aligned to the organisation like the previous group, since there is a vast contrast in their 'inside' and 'outside' classroom approaches. Though they categorise themselves as 'romantic teachers', the classroom practices which I have observed compel me to place them towards "lion tamer' notion of a teacher.

The first four categories, which constitute 89% of the teachers, have undergone less identity crisis. They have formed a unified self-concept that is relatively stable at the present. The fifth category, which constitutes 4% of the teachers, seems to undergo maximum identity crisis. There is a sixth category of teachers that I found very difficult to understand. Though there is a contrast between what they say and practice, they are also equally committed to the organisation. This makes me assume that the contrast occurs without their knowledge, and because of the lack of self-reflexivity. Interestingly there seems to be high level of commitment amongst all the categories of teachers.

The everyday techniques in school used by the first four categories of teachers (who have "really" aligned their identities with the organisation) are more or less the same, and those used by the fifth and the sixth categories (who have "apparently" aligned) is similar. For example, teachers belonging to the first set smile when children answer back, change the topic when children get bored, explain to children again when they don't do their homework, and respond in an unbiased manner to both fast and slow learners. But teachers in the second set get frustrated when children make noise, get angry when children don't understand, label the slow learners, and so on. Thus, most of them believe that if a child does not understand the concept then the reason lies in the teaching strategies and not in the child herself.

Figure 1 - The Graphical Representation of Category of Teachers
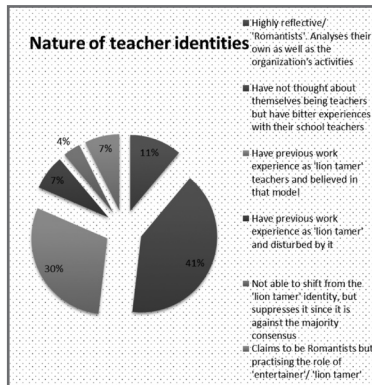
The first four categories (89%) are aligned to what the organisation ideally envisages. Thus, in total, this is how the identities of teachers and their identity work looks like (see figure 2)

Figure 2 - Teacher Alignment with the Organisation
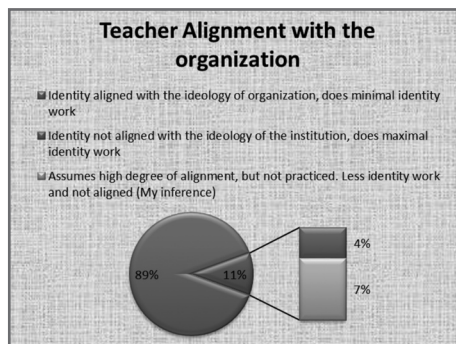
4. Organisational Strategies that Help Teachers Align

The school under study has been accredited as a study center by the National Institute of Open Schooling under the Open Basic Scheme, which enables the school to adopt a great deal of flexibility in organising teaching-learning experiences and in designing curriculum. This flexibility in itself is not sufficient to provide complete autonomy to the teacher. It also depends on the principles - formal and informal - of the organisation. According to my observations and interactions with teachers, the following are some of the features of the organisation that helped teachers align to the organisation and enabled them to form stable self-identities.

4.1 Peer Observation

One of the important procedures, as part of the selection process to the school, is peer observation. All the teachers invariably responded that it is by observing the classes of senior teachers that they internalised the model of teaching prevailing in the school. One teacher responded, "I saw this model working well with the children than the previous model of 'strict teacher' that I thought was most effective. Teachers get more love and respect from the children when they are not scared of the teacher and teachers are friendly to them." Such models and peer culture is crucial in the socialisation process of any organisation. A large part of our perception when we enter any organisation is shaped by how others are oriented in the organisation and how committed they are.

4.2 Trust and Autonomy

Teachers are given maximum autonomy in deciding about their teaching plans, with flexible targets to complete at the end of the year. The organisation believes that the teachers are responsible and capable. There is no "chasing and firing" of the teachers to complete the syllabus. This gives the teachers a sense of belongingness to the organisation.

This autonomy is not just confined to the teaching learning process but is extended to the managerial aspects. Teachers discuss about every issue related to the organisation ranging from the learning difficulties of children to the fund raising for the organisation in a highly democratic environment. There is only a thin line of separation between the management and the teachers. Teachers are involved in all the decision making processes regarding the school. This model of 'power' between the management and the teachers is similar to the power equation between the teachers and the students.

Right from addressing teachers as 'akka' (elder sister) or 'anna' (elder brother) or in most cases 'teacher', there is a great deal of autonomy for the children. The teachers sit with the children on the carpet thereby trying to eliminate subtle power differences. Each child does the work at her own pace. The teachers helps each child separately and equally. This eliminates the conception of power being vested in the teachers' hands.

The autonomy of children and teachers also results from the ways in which the organisation conceives and visualises knowledge. Knowledge is not seen as a separate entity that they have to strive for; instead it is perceived as being embedded in the everyday life of each child. In the words of one of the teachers, "Only after coming here, I realised that what is given in the textbook

is nothing but what is already there outside." This kind of orientation has important consequences in the school as it ensures valuing the experiences and the worth of every child.

5. Identification with the Tribe

Since most of the teachers are adivasis, there is strong identification of teachers with their tribe. Teachers feel the need to work sincerely for the upliftment of their tribe. They have a strong commitment towards the education of each and every tribal child. The organisation is successful in passing on this spirit to non-tribal teachers as well. The learning process connects directly with the children because most of the teachers in the community speak in their mother tongue. The cultural curriculum strengthens this identification of the teachers with their tribe.

Every teacher believes that it is the teacher who fails when the child does not learn. All the teachers believe that different children learn differently not because of the innate differences among children but due to the differences in the background of the children, like 'illiterate or insecure family background', 'lack of nutrition', and 'irregularity'. Thus, teachers have understanding about the personal histories of children since the community is closely linked with the school. This has helped in building an informal and fearless learning environment for the children, which might not have been possible with a group comprising only of non- tribal teachers.

6. Teachers Trying to Form Group Identity

Expressions such as "we don't want any of our team members to resign", "we all should go together for the trip", "we all have same thinking", "we don't get into any conflict, because all of us think of the welfare of children", were echoed several times in the school. Teachers seemed to listen to each other, discuss, and then decide the merit of any issue or problem. Sharing of responsibilities when some teachers are absent, and helping each other without hesitation was very obvious. Most of the teachers don't see their personal and professional lives as separate. They don't see any change in their behavior inside and outside the school.

Ninety six percent (except the fifth category) of teachers believe that they are in the right place. There is a great deal of emotional support that the teachers offer each other. There are some teachers who seem to have a better say in decision-making process but with mutual understanding and recognition from other teachers. This coordination prevents any informal groupism among the teachers.

7. Highly Reflective Management

The management of the organisation is highly reflective. It recognises the efforts of the teachers, and at the same time guides them towards the larger social purpose. It does not see the teachers who are not aligned as a threat but as an opportunity to improve its strategies. It shares power with the teachers, and no information is hidden from them. There are no symbols of power in the organisation like 'separate office for the principal', 'teachers carrying stick', or 'special provisions and facilities for teachers or management'. The organisation is highly normative[v] rather than coercive[vi] or remunerative[vii]. This is reflected not only in management- teacher relations but also in teacher-child relations.

8. Emphasis on Method rather than Content

The organisation values attitudes and dispositions of teachers than the content. This gives them time and space to develop content at their own pace. According to the management, teachers should be ready to unlearn and relearn, rather than 'unwilling to change'; once a child finds it comfortable to learn with the teacher then a lot of self-learning can also take place. Although this is true for every child, this is particularly relevant in an Adivasi context. Because for them learning takes place incidentally during the socialisation of an individual into the culture, and not through the abstract signs and symbols of the textbook. The understanding of education as something deliberately planned for and provided to children through mediators (teachers) who can transmit knowledge is irrelevant in Adivasi community, as the emphasis here is on skills and content related to everyday practical life. This understanding of the community is passed on to every teacher during the orientation. Therefore, child-centered pedagogy, which many teachers have internalised in their identity, has its roots in the socio-cultural context.

One of the trustees (who is also teaching in the school) reflects in the Teacher Plus magazine (March 2013) of Azim Premji University as follows: "The teachers including tribal and non-tribal ones had to understand the complexities of the Adivasi way of life, their language, their customs. Education in the Adivasi system is a process of socialisation, and unless the teacher is able to establish a special rapport with the child, almost on a one to one basis, the child will not get involved in learning."

9. Limitations of the study

I failed to understand the nature of identity formation and conflict of the sixth category of teachers since questions beyond the limits of what I have framed

would have intruded into their personal space. The sixth category of teachers believe that they are in the right place, that they work for the benefit of the organisation, that they internalise the larger social purpose but they fail to put those into practice. This does not seem to be deliberate. But what is worth noticing is that this 7% of teachers are part of the management and they seem to have more positional power (though not explicitly exercised). This could be one of the reasons that nobody questions them. Interestingly these teachers play a major role in orienting every new teacher to the organisational policy.

Though the conversation with most of the teachers was in Malayalam and Tamil, it has been translated verbatim into English while writing the report.

10. Conclusion

This study has looked at how an alternative school like Vidyodaya facilitates teachers to form stable identities, which makes their work, as well as that of the organisation, easy and productive. Vidyodaya being a highly normative organisation puts immense effort in helping teachers avoid identity conflicts. As a result, the majority of the teachers are satisfied with their jobs. The organisation values the teachers' efforts and creates a democratic environment to give space for everyone's voice. This shows that a careful mode of selection and socialisation can enormously decrease the investments (both resources and efforts) required for control in the organisations to pursue their goals.

The conception of an ideal teacher described by most of the teachers deviated from the traditional model. They believed that, 'there are variety of ways to teach a single concept', 'each child is unique', 'children fail to learn when they are scared', 'children are natural inquirers', and so on. The notion of professional identity is not assumed as rigid by them, but is seen as open to be reflected upon and modification. This vision of the organisation helps the teachers to form a unified holistic identity, which does not much separate their personal and professional identities.

The teacher has dual relationship in the school as seen in the figure below.

Figure 3 - Relational Structure
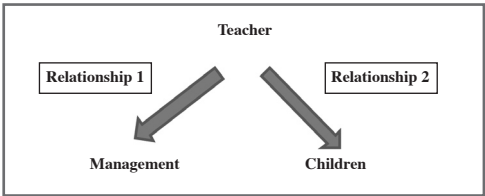
Eighty nine percent of the teachers maintained coherence and consistency in both the relationships (1 and 2 as shown in the diagram), and had established very stable identities. Four percent of the teachers could not internalise both the relationships in the way in which organisation demands, and are still in the process of identity work. Seven percent of the teachers accept the ideology behind relationship 1 but do not transfer the pattern into relationship 2. But they don't have identity crisis because of it, since they are not controlled by anyone as explained in the previous section.

One important implication of this study for the organisation is regarding the fifth and sixth category of teachers who have not internalised the ideologies of organisation completely. An increase in the number of teachers in both these categories in the future may lead to the formation of informal groups in the organisation. It would be ideal if the organisation can help the teachers modify their identities than suppressing them.

One of the teachers in the above categories responded to me in the midst of the conversation, "I saw your project questions put up on the notice board. The question in which you are asking, 'which teacher do you like?' should not be asked to children. They will obviously tell the name of someone who is very friendly with them. They think teachers who advise and punish are bad. But they are immature and their mind is unstable now. They will understand the value of such teachers when they grow up." This reflects the identity crisis that a conventional teacher can undergo in an alternative school where punishment is not considered a desirable thing.

Though there are numerous mechanisms in place to orient teachers, the organisation being a normative one, a small percentage of teachers are yet to settle their identity work. But the school allows each person to take his/her own time and to be reflective. At the same time, it also sees that there are no major deviations from the organisational ideology. The majority of the teachers, who have aligned, foster this process by establishing their group identity.

A major finding of this study is that there is prevalent prejudice about the beliefs and perceptions of rural teachers. When Vidyodaya can train the youth of the Adivasi community, who have not even completed their formal school education, into being highly reflective teachers, why can't this be done in other schools? Why do our schools still have teachers holding traditional beliefs about teaching, which is a major lacunae in the Indian education system?

Notes

[i] Woods and Jeffrey (2002) explain the identity work done by primary teachers in the UK in order to resolve the conflicts between their social identity and personal identity. Teachers have engaged in identity work, characterised mainly by identity talk, and a number of emotional and intellectual strategies in trying to resolve dilemmas faced during transition from "the holism, humanism and vocationalism of the old Plowden self-identity" to "new assigned social identity signalled in the assault on child-centred philosophy" in the UK. In the process, teachers reconstruct their identities in order to cope up with the new situations.

[ii] Visit the website of the school for more details, http://www.vidyodaya.org/vbvt/

[iii] Statement from the school website, http://www.vidyodaya.org/vbvt/

[iv] SSA Bridge Course Residential Center for drop-out children in partnership with the government was started in July 2012. There is one more SSA centre run by the trust, in Kozhykandy, Srimadurai, which has been started in partnership with the SSA in August 2011.

[v] In normative organisations, it is the norms of the organisation that motivate its members. In this case people give more importance to the quality of the work they do, and they feel greater commitment to the organisation.

[vi] Organisations where coercive power is exercised and control is based on the application of physical means is ascribed as coercive power.

[vii] Organisations that use material rewards, which consist of allocating some favours in order to recognise and appreciate the effort/outcome in terms of amenities or entities.

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