

Some Innovative Approaches To Primary Education

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ALONGSIDE government effort, a few public innovators are applying various innovative schemes designed to attract the disadvantaged children to primary education, prevent dropout and to make primary education more sustainable. Jamil Ahmed, a theatre activist, is introducing "Theatre in Education" to make primary education more interesting for the learner and to raise his or her self-confidence and awareness about the vast possibilities of human life. His slogan is "Education is a joy."

Jamil Ahmed has chosen three primary schools for the underprivileged — two in the city and one in Baliakandi thana in Rajbari district. The lessons in the text are taught through dramatization, with children playing roles, personalizing the problems and issues discussed in the text books and bringing their own perceptions and experiences into play. In this way students assimilate knowledge more deeply and joyfully and remain actively involved in and responsive to the process of learning. Theatre has the advantage of creating a laboratory situation where through improvisation and play acting children not only learn about problems but "experience" these problems.

Although the method is still being developed, initial results are encouraging. Jamil Ahmed says that in the primary school in Baliakandi where he is applying his innovative method, attendance has improved significantly, even during pre harvesting season when work in the field tends to keep disadvantaged students away from school. He is all praise for the primary school teachers who, convinced of the effectiveness of his method, give their fullest cooperation. He thinks that in future the demonstrable success of his model will force the government to replicate it on a wider scale.

Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim, a physicist who edits a science journal, is

developing three years' educational course for the underprivileged that has the component of technical skill to make education an income-generating activity. His 350 schools all over the country have enrolled 16,000 students all of whom are underprivileged. Upon enrollment they are trained in a locally usable technology. It can be soap making or candle making or managing tree nursery or, for older children, repairing diesel pumps. Thus while children begin to learn the 3R's they also begin to earn by marketing their skills or product. (Some kind of marketing arrangement is also there).

When education becomes financially rewarding, there can be no question of dropout and on completion of the three-year course, students leave school not only literate, but also technically skilled. The cost per child, according to Mohammad Ibrahim, is also lower than the regular schools. He said that after completing the three-year course a student becomes fit to get admission, if he chooses, into class four of a government primary school. They have devised a syllabus based on the syllabus of the Board.

Is he not creating a parallel system that may cause confusion and hold back the goal of universal primary education? "No," affirms Ibrahim. "We are enrolling only those who would have remained out of the government primary school."

Why do so many poor children dropout from primary education? This question long exercised the mind of Ibrahim Sobahan, another social innovator and executive of the Association for School-Based Education, a research group specialising in primary education. The cause of

dropout is of course a complex mix of socioeconomic factors. His finding was that it is possible to vastly improve the quality of classroom teaching and simplify comprehension and stimulate interest of the disadvantaged students at no cost at all — by simply increasing the period-length to 60 minutes from the traditional 30 minutes, keeping the total school-time unchanged. A 60 minute period-length makes it possible to complete the lesson in class and even leaves some extra time for individual evaluation. This dispenses with the need for homework and it is homework that poses as a disadvantage to the poorer children whose home atmosphere and family situation are not congenial for studies.

By persuading some primary schools to adopt the new routine, Ibrahim Sobhan could bring down the rate of dropout and raise the quality of education. More schools are now replicating Ibrahim Sobhan's model, with profit. He hopes that soon the 60-minute period will become the rule.

Why children of maid servants, garment workers, other working mothers and single mothers of the low-income bracket either do not enroll in primary school or dropout too soon? The mother does have a small income and is willing to spare some money for her child's education but the child seldom makes it to the final stage of the five-year course.

This set Mahbooba Akhtar Mahmood Leena thinking. Leena, an M.A. in Bangla literature, is a woman's rights activist with vast experience working among distressed urban families of Dhaka. She too found that their living condition and home atmosphere is uncongenial.

She founded Uttsho, a residential

school for the children of underprivileged single mothers and working mothers. Students at Uttsho receive food, clothing, education and all care and facilities of a residential school, but at a highly subsidised cost. The cost per student is Tk 1650 a month but Uttsho charges the mothers anywhere from Tk 100 to Tk 1000 according to income. To meet the rest of the amounts, sponsors are contacted who undertake to make a donation, preferably in an annual lump sum. A sponsor may choose to tie his/her donation to a particular student or keep it a completely impersonal affair.

Leena emphasizes that Uttsho is a residential school and not an orphanage and frequent contact between mother and child are encouraged and family warmth is sought to be created. Leena feels great admiration for the sponsors all of whom are not wealthy but are fired by zeal of philanthropy for the cause of child welfare and scrupulously honour their monetary pledge.

Leena's project is still in its early stage and the number of children at Uttsho is still limited. She hopes to expand its enrollment and to build its own financial base by undertaking income-generating activities like catering. She also hopes that the success of her project will prompt its replication by other individuals and organizations.

Is there anything common among Ibrahim Sobhan, Jamil Ahmed, Muhammad Ibrahim and Mahbooba Akhtar Mahmood Leena? Yes. All of them are Ashoka Fellows. Ashoka is an international fellowship network that gives support to individual change makers who dedicate themselves to public service. There are 34 Ashoka Fellows in Bangladesh, 96 in India and 428 the world over. They are working in fields like literacy, health, environment and agriculture. In Bangladesh their activities are slowly making an impact.

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