Education For Street Children

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SULEYMANE, a 14 year-old shoeshine boy in Dakar, far from his native village, has a dream: that one day he will be able to go to school, learn enough to get a better job and earn enough to help his poor village build a health care centre.

Suleymane is one of the millions of street children around the world who are not in school but want to learn and want it desperately. Some have been to school but dropped out due to poverty or poor grades, others have never seen the inside of a classroom. Abandoned, orphaned or victims of war, street children have no money for school uniforms or school fees and must usually resrot to odd jobs to survive. With no political power, they often face abuse, violence or sexual exploitation. Sometimes they are even killed by the police or private militias. "Going to school is my only way out "says Suleymane.

To examine the do's and don'ts of educating street children, UNESCO organized, in collaboration with UNICEF, a seminar in Paris from September 30 to October 4, 1991. Twenty-five people, representing U.N. agencies and NGO project managers with first-hand experience, participated. The seminar was part of UNESCO's priority programme to promote basic education for street children and other disadvantaged groups. Focusing mainly on research, technical support for innovative projects and exchange of information, UNESCO is reinforcing its cooperation with UNICEF and NGOs in this area.

"Education is essential to help the child develop confidence and self-esteem," said Alphonse Tay, sociologist and UNESCO programme specialist. "And unless a street child starts believing in himself, there is not much hope for a better future."

Obtaining statistics on street children is tricky, because they rarely appear in surveys and their very existence is often denied by authorities. Estimates range from 30 to 100 million. "One hundred million—the equivalent of the population of France and the United Kingdom together!

"Governments are extraordinarily ineffective in reaching street children," said Peter Dalglish, executive director of Street Kids International, a Canadian-based NGO. "Many governments are in confrontation with the kids, rather than helping them. I find it unbelievable that seals in my country (Canada) have more rights than kids in the cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America."

Most projects are run by small local NGOs which often have insufficient staff and resources to reach out on a large-scale. As one participant put it: "We are only a drop in an ocean of need."

What makes a programme for street children work? It should combine, participants stressed, general literacy and numeracy with jobs skills, political education, art such as dance and drawing, moral values, legal rights, and health and nutrition.

"One of the lessons we have learnt is that you cannot develop an educational programme for street children identical to the formal school system," says Ezra Mbogori, director of the Undugu Society in Kenya. "We are dealing with kids who have been forced into adulthood quicker than any of us can imagine."

The Undugu Society offers tuition-free curriculum (approved by the Ministry of Education) which, after three years, allows good students to enter the regular school system. Teachers are normally hand-picked from slum areas, and given special training. Those who succeed best, participants said, are often not professional teachers and social workers but former street children who have first-hand knowledge of the kids' environment.

One of the main issues facing educatorn today is AIDS prevention. According of CHILDHOPE, an international advocacy movement for street children, the number infected with the Human Immuno-deficiency Virus (HIV) is reaching "alarming proportions." Studies in Brazil, Sudan and the United States show HIV-positive rates to be between two and 10 per cent for street youth. In Brazil, public health officials describe AIDS as a "time bomb".

Street Kids International took up the challenge. In close cooperation with the National Film Board of Canada and WHO, they created the Karate Kids, a cartoon which is now available in 17 languages and shown in 70 countries. The key to its success? The film is entertaining as well as informative. The kids want to see it over and over again.

When discussing education for street children, one question obviously arises: how does one attract them to classes when every hour away from work means less money to survive? "You have to strike a deal," says Nicolas Fenton, Director of CHILDHOPE. "You have to tell them that 'If you come two hours a day to our centre, we will in turn help you to survive better."

Another approach—that of bringing non-formal education into the workplace—has been tried in Pakistan where employers have agreed to release their under-aged employees from work one to one and a half hours earlier in order to attend classes.

"Of course, what you really want to tell these employers is to stop exploiting the children," says Marie de la Soudiere, a UNICEF consultant in Islamabad. "But then they would just get angry and turn off. Our 'friendly' approach often works. One carpet manufacturer even offered to provide space and the salary of a teacher".

Although educational programmes vary in direction and scope, one contant remains: no programme can be successful if the teachers do not first gain the children's trust. Or as one particpant put it :"We know, we are on the right track when the children stop lying to us".

"Inside a street child, who gives the appearance of being tough and difficult, is a child who has never experienced what it is be to loved, and what it is to be human," says Christina Nobel, an Irish woman who two years ago, opened up a medical and social centre for abandoned babies and street children in Vietnam. A former street child herself, she spent countless night in alleyways and under bridges between the age of 10 and 16, and knowns what she's talking about.

—UNESCO SOURCES