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Children Speak

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A Newsletter of the Organization for the Protection of Children's Rights

Message from the President

One of the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations to be attained by the year 2015 is to achieve universal primary education. It is trite to state that an individual who is educated will be in a better position to contribute to the well-being of his/her family, community, country and therefore the world.

All children have the right to go to school, become literate, learn about the world, develop friendships and acquire skills and knowledge that will help them to improve the quality of their lives while growing up to become independent, socially responsible and productive contributors to society.

Unfortunately, not all children have the possibility of attending school on a regular basis.

When poverty is an issue, when countries engage in endless civil wars, when HIV and Aids ravage a nation, when child marriages, child trafficking, child labor and child prostitution are the "norm", it is no wonder that it becomes very difficult to provide the basic right to a quality education.

There are however positive incentives that encourage parents to send their children to school. The

"cash for education" programs in Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua and Mexico which provide cash transfers to poor families who ensure that their children attend school, alleviate current poverty and encourage families to invest in their children's future. These programs have had a positive impact on school enrollment, poverty, health and nutrition.

Eliminating school fees is another strategy that has proven to be effective in increasing school enrollment. We invite you to read about the impact of tuition fees in two articles contained in this issue of Children Speak, "Education at the Crossroads" and "Move Towards Private Schools".

An education provides children with the freedom to decide what they want to accomplish in life. It is our duty to ensure that each child can benefit not only from the ability to dream about a brighter future but has the appropriate tools to achieve that dream. ■



Riccardo Di Done



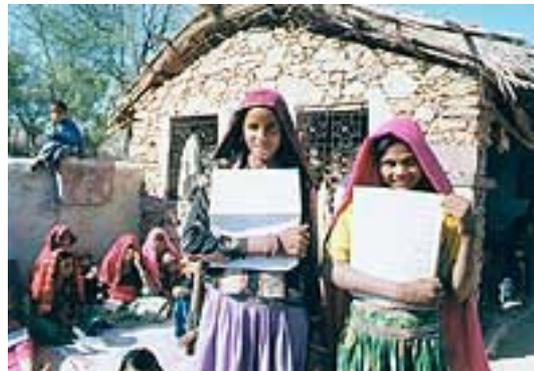
Education at the . . .

Roshni Udyavar

There should be concern about the development ethics of a growing economy where more than 250 million people live below the poverty line - in shanties, slums and squatters, in inhuman and miserable conditions. Even while India has witnessed a steep economic growth rate of nearly 9.2% in the first quarter of 2007, basic commodities are increasingly beyond the reach of a large majority of people. Because of the widening divide between the rich and the poor, social reformers feel that a fundamental change is required - a transformation of minds and attitudes. Then all eyes turn to that primary building block which moulds children and youth - their school.

An Op-ed article in the New York Times by Anand Giridhardas last year stated that "India was once divided chiefly by caste. Today, new criteria are creating a different divide: skills. Those with marketable skills are sought by a new economy of call centers and software houses; those without are ensnared in old, drudge-like jobs. But the chance to learn such skills is still a prerogative reserved, for the most part, for the modern equivalent of India's upper castes - the few thousand students who graduate each year from academies like the Indian Institutes of Management and the Indian Institutes of Technology. Their alumni, mostly engineers, walk the hallways of Wall Street and Silicon Valley and are stewards for some of the largest companies.

In the shadow of those marquee institutions, most of the 11 million students in India's 18,000 colleges and universities receive starkly inferior training, heavy on obedience and light on useful job skills."



Students with meager educational facilities in rural India

Recent news from schools in my city, Mumbai, has not been encouraging. There is a boom in private schools providing international degrees and standards of education. The average fee in these schools is about Rs. 8000 to Rs. 10,000 (US \$ 245) per year, making them out of reach for 9 out of 10 Indians. These schools provide a wide range of facilities and opportunities - football, cricket, tennis, swimming, horse back riding, advanced audio-visuals, computers, bus pick-up, and many others. On the down side, there is exposure to drugs, cigarettes and alcohol at a very young age.

Unfortunately, municipal schools do not have the same facilities. Children from poor families often walk to school in their bare feet. Books and other school accessories such as desks and black boards are a luxury. Inadequate educational resources and badly trained teachers are the norm. Furthermore, the physical infrastructure in the schools is crumbling.

According to the Directive Principles of India's Constitution which provides for compulsory education for children up to the age of 14, education is the responsibility of the State and National governments. The public expenditure on education was a mere 4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2007. The global trend is towards privatization. The United States of America is a good example. A survey conducted in 2003 - 04 showed that private schools comprised 23 percent of elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. and enrolled about 10 percent of U.S. elementary and secondary school students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey 2004, the national average of private school tuition per year was US \$ 4300 for elementary schools, US \$ 10,600 for secondary schools and US \$ 6,900 for combined schools.

. . . CROSSROADS

Growth in the private sector schools has been on the rise in Pakistan since 1995. A senior economist in the Development Research Group at the World Bank was quoted as saying that “education in Pakistan was going the US way.” A study by the World Bank in which Das was involved shows that 30 percent of the primary schools in Pakistan are now private schools. However, private schools in Pakistan are much cheaper since a student in a medium level school will pay only up to Rs. 1200 (US \$ 30) per year.

A Herald survey in 2004 of more than 30 private schools in Australia indicated that most will increase the fees by at least double the inflation rate of 2.6% with some wealthy schools increasing their fees by about US \$ 885 a year. For example, year 11 or 12 at the Cranbrook, Sydney Grammar and Shore school will cost US\$ 15,000 while others such as the Ascham, Barker College, Kambala, The King’s School, Knox Grammar, Newington College, SCEGGS Darlinghurst and the Scots College will amount to US \$ 13,275.

It does not matter whether schools are municipal or private. What is important is the need to provide basic minimum facilities and standards of education. There is a need for independent or government supported bodies to monitor the ‘quality’ of education, to restrict the tuition fees to a maximum limit and to maintain a basic minimum standard for all. This may be difficult since ‘quality’ is a relative term. However, the quantitative needs of

Expenditure on Education as Percentage of GDP (1993 - 2004)

	Health	Education	Defense
India	2	2	14
Canada	3	2	6
U.S.A.	23	3	19
Japan	2	6	4
Sweden	3	6	6
New Zealand	17	21	3
Israel	13	14	20

Source: State of the World Children’s Report 2006



Students of Ryan International School (Gurgaon) in May 2005 being honored by the Chargé d’Affaires of the US Embassy in New Delhi, Robert O. Blake for winning the State Department’s 2005 “Doors to Diplomacy” award.

students can be identified and satisfied by the State. It is crucial that the educational system becomes accountable, provides knowledge for the holistic growth of all students, and at the same time make them aware of the social and environmental problems of society instead of only preparing them to meet the demands of the market. Knowledge, value and ethics must form the three vertices of a good education system. ■

Move Towards Private Schools in Gujarat, India

By Kumar Anand

Ahmedabad, September 28, 2007: In the last five years, while the state government has been repeatedly talking about bringing down the primary school drop-out level to zero by 2010, and promising more government schools in tribal and coastal areas under the Sagar Khedu Yojana, it has been gradually relegating the responsibility for school education to private players. This is particularly pronounced in tribal dominated districts.

This fact is established from the data provided by the Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board. Only 155 government schools were created in the last few decades, with a handful of additions in recent years. On the other hand, the number of private schools has climbed from 1, 247 to 2,705 in the last five years. Grant-in-aid schools have also shot up to 5,007 in these five years.

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Failure of the System

By S. Shanthi, Times News Network

Passing in exams has always been a reason to celebrate, while failure is generally associated with sorrow and humiliation. This seems to be the reason behind the increasing number of suicides among students during exams in India.

To counter such stress, the National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT) has proposed to replace the word 'fail' with 'unsatisfactory' or 'repeat'. Educationists say children should be taught that failure is part and parcel of life, but branding a child as a 'failure' can have extreme consequences as the word has negative connotations. "School children are in their formative years. To be branded as 'fail' could upset their mental equilibrium. It leads to an emotional breakdown," says D. P. N. Prasad, Principal, Bombay Scottish School, Mumbai.

The term may not be child-friendly, but can avoiding 'failure' help? Abraham Ebenezer, Principal of Ebenezer International School in Bangalore says, "The child should be taught to take failure in the right spirit, but telling them that they have failed at a young age can be traumatic. There are other ways of saying it."

Psychologists seem to agree. "Success and failure go hand in hand. When you pass out of school, there would be ups and downs in family, work and relationships. However in Indian society, failure is not considered a failure of effort, but a failure of the individual, which is too much to bear for a child. One has to be polite and firm with children and not harsh and corporal," says child psychiatrist Jitendra Nagpal. Students say failure in exams is a terrible feeling. Explains Subrajyoti Basu, a class X student, "Failure is too tough to take. And suicidal tendencies only come under extreme pressure."

A Second Chance

What happened to the age-old adage "failures are stepping stones to success"? Aren't children being disconnected from a fact of life? Bhagat says, "Reality takes a toll on a person. Isn't the fact that a student is not promoted to the next class, a reality too much to handle? Rather, the results should reflect the feeling that the child is getting a second chance. It will be more positive

than writing 'failed'. Adds T.H.Ireland, principal, James School Kolkatta, "Students can be good in extra curricular activities and not necessarily in studies. Bad performance need not mean a failure in life. Often when students repeat a year, they emerge as better performers.

Even in their career, the students are extremely successful."

N.R.Shetty, vice president of International Federation of Engineering Education Societies, USA, agrees: "Students should not be discouraged with a single stroke. In many instances, a student may excel at other activities rather than studies."



Profile

Part of the blame lies with our education system that relies heavily on performance in

exams, leading to stiff competition among students and rising expectations by parents. "Earlier if you did well, it was enough. Now you have to be the best. That is why children have so many personality problems these days," says sociologist Mala Kapur Shankardass.

Would it help if the word "fail" is replaced by "unsatisfactory" or "repeat"? NCERT spokesperson Bishno Charan Patro says, "When you use the word 'fail' it is hard-hitting impact."

There are some who say there's a long way to go. "NCERT hasn't understood the gravity of the problem. Just by changing the word, you are not going to change the system," says Kusum Jain, convener, Parents' Forum for Meaningful Education (PFME). "The terms 'repeat' and 'unsatisfactory' are no better. Rather, the reports can mention that the student will be given one more chance with a possibility to do better," says Malini Bhagat.

A child-friendly curriculum and encouraging teachers can make all the difference. "What's needed is to create a fearless environment for children. Guiding them to the right path is essential," says Sandhya, Principal, Sophia High School, Bangalore. "Minimum competency levels must not be diluted, but at the same time, an opportunity must be given for a learner to prove himself or have alternative exam channels," adds K.B. Kushal, regional director, western zone, DAV institutions, Mumbai. ■

Afghanistan Observes World Teacher's Day

To address the shortage of qualified teachers in Afghanistan, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Education in training 80 master trainers and 16,000 female teachers from 11 provinces with courses in pedagogical skills, teaching methodologies, classroom management, lesson planning and child development.

In 2006, UNICEF and partners supported the training of 40,000 teachers on pedagogy through a joint teachers' education programme. Also, 57,766 teachers of primary grades were oriented on new textbooks for grades two and five, with UNICEF support.

UNICEF and partners are also supporting the Government of Afghanistan in a

comprehensive teacher-training system in primary education, including strategies for enlarging the pool of female teachers.

"The drive to increase the number of female teachers and improve standards of teaching is an important step in ensuring that girls continue to return to the classroom, and to reduce the risk of drop-out amongst pupils already enrolled," said Catherine Mbengue, UNICEF Representative in Afghanistan.

Female teachers were barred from practising their profession during the Taliban rule. Since 2002 UNICEF has been working to train female teachers for formal and community-based schools around the country. ■

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Mosque Visit to Teach Tolerance to School Children

School children in Clackmannanshire are to be taken to visit local mosques in the wake of the Alva terror trial. It was developed after former Alva Academy pupil Mohammed Atif Siddique was accused of terrorism offences. Siddique will be sentenced next month after being found guilty at the High Court in Glasgow.

Ochil and South Perthshire MP Gordon Banks told the BBC: "We had a few discussions to come up with ideas of how we can allow our schools to better understand the role of the Muslim community and their religion, just to try and show to the rest of the community that they are here to offer something positive. I'm just saddened a little that it's taken an event like the arrest of last April to move us on to a situation where we actually all start thinking about the opportunity to do these things.



Maybe we should have been thinking about these things before."

The scheme would be rolled out across all schools in the area. "World religions are a core component of the curriculum and always have been," a spokeswoman for Clackmannanshire Council said. "The council's education service is currently working with Alloa Mosque and Central Scotland Racial Equality Council on enhancing pupils' learning about Islam and the Muslim way of life." ■

Move Towards Private Schools

Chandubhai Joshi, General Secretary of the Gujarat State Schools Teachers' Association said: "The state government has been deliberately creating a situation where parents are forced to opt for private schools, and over and above that, not all families are able to afford private schools either. Most private schools follow the 30 to 1 student-teacher ratio, which is far less than the 66 to 1 ratio at public schools. The question becomes, why does the government not add more government schools and provide affordable facilities?"

And, even while the number of private schools is soaring, the government is yet to pass a resolution directing private schools to maintain standards in terms of fee structure, infrastructure and the quality of education.

The statistics of schools in tribal districts show that the number of private schools is much higher than government schools. In Panchmahals, there are 114 private schools against 4 government schools. In Bharuch, there are 75 private schools against 2 government schools. In Vadodara, Valsad, Sabarkantha and Surat districts there is only one government school against 202, 57, 102 and 397 private schools respectively.

The government, however, defended its stand saying that it is working on adding around one hundred new schools under its Sagar Khedu Yojana, especially meant for tribal and coastal regions of the state.

Manish Doshi, Executive Council member of Gujarat University, said: "This is mere commercialisation of education. While private schools charge huge sums of money, there are not enough government schools to cater to the growing demand of students. There are also several grant-in-aid and government schools that have also been given to private players by the state government." ■

<http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/figures-show-Govt-backs-private-schools/222428/>

Safety Of Children's Medicines

The lack of thorough and reliable clinical data on the way medicines affect children requires strengthened safety monitoring and vigilance of medicinal products. This is the fundamental message of "Promoting Safety of Medicines for Children" campaign released by the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva on 21 September 2007. The campaign is part of a broad effort WHO is initiating to expand children's access to quality-assured, safe and effective medicines.

A large proportion of side effects or adverse reactions to medicines in the adult population are due to irrational use or human error and are therefore preventable. In the case of children, even more factors come into play. The main challenge is the lack of clinical data. This results in fewer medicines being developed, produced and marketed specifically for children. Often, children are given medicines that have only been tested in adults and are not officially approved for use in child populations (this is known as "off-label use").

"We need to learn more about the way children's bodies react to medicines so we can improve global child health. That's why it's extremely important to keep track of potential side effects in child populations. Ultimately, this will save lives and build up a knowledge base for the future," said Dr Howard Zucker, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Technology and Pharmaceuticals.

Non-availability of appropriate paediatric formulations forces health care providers to resort to administering portions of crushed or dissolved tablets or the powder contained inside a capsule without any specific indication of the required dosage. For that reason, according to the report, potentially harmful medication errors may be three times more common in children than in adults.

An appropriate format or structure for a child's medicine is also important. Small children sometimes choke or asphyxiate while trying to swallow big tablets. For instance, earlier this year four children under 36 months died from choking on albendazole tablets (used to combat worms) during a de-worming campaign in Ethiopia.

New and innovative medicines on the market provide indications for children but still lack evidence of long-term benefit and risk. Side effects associated with antiretroviral medicines, for example, have been reported to occur in up to 30% of HIV-infected children on antiretroviral therapy. Most of those side effects



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could be reversed by modifying the dosage or changing to an alternative medicine.

The report estimates that less than 10% of all serious adverse reactions to medicines are reported globally. In part, this is due to the fact that many developing countries have not yet established medicine safety monitoring and reporting systems; and when they have these are usually under-resourced. Because children - particularly very young ones - are less articulate in describing symptoms and their non-verbal communication is often misunderstood or ignored, even serious adverse reactions in children often go unreported to health practitioners or authorities.

Intended for policy-makers, manufacturers, medicines control bodies and researchers, Promoting safety of medicines for children provides a series of recommendations to address medicine safety for children.

For instance, all countries should establish national and regional monitoring systems for the detection of serious adverse medicine reactions and medical errors in children. When such reporting systems exist, it is crucial that manufacturers follow up on adverse reactions to their products once they are on the market.

In addition, regulatory authorities need to make an effort to refine the science of clinical trials in children, create an active post-marketing surveillance programme and develop public databases of up to date information about efficacy and safety in paediatric medicines. ■

(World Health Organization)