

Connecting the Bright Spots in India's Dark Education Sky

The Needle's Eye



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It is easy to be overwhelmed by the mess in our education system. It is good to keep in mind, though, that there are many passionate people, both within and outside the government-school system, trying to put things right. The government seems incapable of doing so by itself. Inspiring good-news stories are dotted around our vast country – and they are all happening in disparate ways, like brightly-lit ships passing one another.

THE OCEAN IS STILL DARK AND DEEP

The people who are trying to bring about systemic change, acknowledge that the challenge is huge. They are all trying to move children in government schools from rote learning plagued by teacher absenteeism, inadequate tools, and the temptation to drop out in secondary school, to '21st-century' skills like problem-solving, innovative thinking, and an aspiration to progress to college or vocational education. Each model is remarkable, reproducible, and scalable – if only the government could borrow all best practices, create a template, and pour money and resource into a nationwide crusade.

The nub of the problem is that the government, which is about to unveil the first new Education Policy in 25 years, cannot do all this alone. It will need non-government people to work selflessly, their only reward the belief that they have moved the needle a little.

"When you take a why and you flip it and turn it into a why not, it's an incredible call to action," says Shaheen Mistri, CEO and Founder Trustee of Teach for India (TFI).

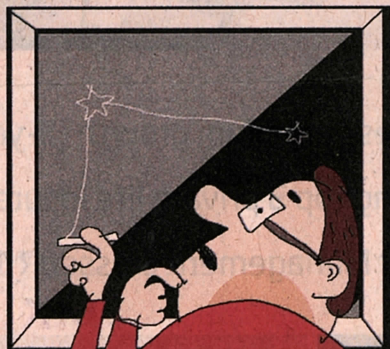
India Education Collective (IEC) works in government schools in seven states across the areas of education governance, classroom processes and teacher development. Every school has to have a School Management Committee (SMC) under the Right To Education Act. "The key issue is that government schools are not owned by anybody," Sreeja, who founded and heads IEC, told me. "When a system is in inertia it is important for an external agency to create a disturbance."

True to our national genius, we have created complex local-government bureaucracies. We have zilla panchayat presidents, CEOs, Block Development Officers (BDOs), and Block Education Officers (BEOs); many panchayats have not even appointed members of standing committees for health and education. The challenge is to get these committees to work with the SMCs. Half a dozen schools can form a

cluster. IEC works with 119 clusters and 80,000 children and 3,000 teachers across 21,000 SMCs. At every level there is a boss. "We make short presentations because panchayat officials are restless people," Sreeja says tongue-in-cheek.

The National Curriculum Framework lays down what children ought to be taught, and even lists 21st-century skills. But at the village classroom level there is no process to measure these learnings. A Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation was laid down but rarely implemented.

Much of the non-governmental intervention is around giving our next generations non-curriculum learning. For instance, Ashoka, the global social-entrepreneurship network set up by Bill Drayton in 1980 in the US, has picked 19 Changemaker schools in India, part of a global effort to share skills like empathy, creative problem-solving and teamwork. They include schools like Anupam Primary in Motidau near Gujarat's Mehsana, which had the country's worst child sex ratio; or Gateway School in Mumbai which works with children with special needs; or Pardada Pardadi Educational Society in Anupshahar in UP's Bulandshahr district, which has about 1,400 girl students in a K-12 campus.



ANIRBAN BORA

Aware that these schools are a drop in the ocean, Ashoka switched tactics to partner 88 mentor-teachers from the Delhi government; they travelled to seven states to gather knowledge, and will form the nucleus of an effort to transform over 1,000 government schools in the capital.

Lisa Heydlauff, one of Ashoka's Education Fellows, has been working for nearly two decades in India; for the past five years, her organisation, called Going to School, has run the Be An Entrepreneur programme across 18 districts in Bihar. Heydlauff and her 250 teammates have designed stories and graphic novels about entrepreneurs, mostly women.

Using cards and board games, Class 9 children learn how to make a business plan, and cash-flow statements while being guided by ethics and fair play. Then they compete in a skills challenge. They may have to go house to house to study how much people spend on electricity or food. The results are collected, logged and shared with the government. The programme has reached 200,000 children in 2,000 government secondary

schools. Heydlauff has been allowed to expand her programme over the next years to grades 10 to 12 and then a year longer, to gauge what children do after graduation. Traditionally, Grade 9 was when the maximum drop-outs occurred in Bihar's schools – girls were married off, and boys dragooned into supplementing the family's income. This is starting to change.

Last year the Be An Entrepreneur children had to create an eight-step business plan to make their schools sustainable. Going to School short-listed 100 students who had the best business ideas. "We ran a 'pitch-it event' in Nalanda in March this year," Ruchi Aggarwal, the programme's Impact Director, told me. Each of the 100 children had to get up on stage to present her or his plan. Fifty-one ideas were picked, and funding obtained for all of them.

Heydlauff notes that Bihar is not a favourite destination for corporate social responsibility budgets, and donors tend to flock to the big cities.

But far from Mumbai's bright lights, the Swades Foundation, run by entertainment mogul-turned-philanthropist Ronnie Screwvala and his wife Zarina, has concentrated for the past three years on the 3,100-sq-km Raigad district in Maharashtra. They are working with 1,200 schools, 800 (preschool) Anganwadis, and 105,000 children. Each teacher is given 18 days of training spread over a year in teaching techniques. Swades has helped augment math, English and science teaching aids, and installed between three and six computers in each school. The Screwvalas also donated a library to each school. "That has been transformational," Ronnie told me. "Everybody had a library but it was always a locked cupboard. The teachers were scared to open the cupboard and let the kids take books home. We forced the schools to add a library period."

Swades has a simple goal: 100 percent attendance, and a high pass rate in the 10th-standard board examination. Its 360-member team in Raigad includes 70 mentor-teachers. Each high-school student was offered free career counselling; Screwvala says their ambitions expanded each year. Now Swades offers 3,000 scholarships for 9-12 grade children.

Also based in Mumbai, Teach for India currently has 1,100 fellows – university graduates and professionals who commit two years to school education. About 70 percent of about 2,000 TFI alumni continue to work in education. TFI works with 40,000 children from grades 2 to 12 in 360 schools in seven cities. "Our alumni are covering thousands of kids," says Mistri, who started working with children through her Akanksha Foundation 26 years ago.

"The more I immerse myself in the system, the more I realise this work is so complex ... I have begun to feel it's not right to say it's solely the government's responsibility. There are people in all sectors who really want to shift things for kids. The more bright spots we get and amplify the better," Mistri told me. That is a good wish.



#123

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