

Meaning-Making through Education in the Slums: My Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

The concept, perception, and definition of slums vary across the states, depending on their socio-economic conditions, but their physical characteristics are almost similar. Slums are usually a cluster of hutments with dilapidated and infirm structures having common toilet facilities, suffering from lack of basic amenities, inadequate arrangement for drainage, and disposal of solid waste and garbage (Slum Report, 2010: p.3). According to Encyclopaedia Britannica slums are "...residential areas that are physically and socially deteriorated and in which satisfactory family life is impossible..." Slums, hence, are not a conducive place to co-habit. And expecting the children from these ghettos to have quality education would be too tall an expectation.

Needless to say, children in the slums are bound to miss basic life amenities that every normal child is expected to enjoy and cherish.

Field Experiences

The field experiences were opposed to what I had envisaged. This was a new excursion into a realm of social solidarity and togetherness made possible through education. This slum, which has roughly 20–30 odd households, is located in Timarpur, North Delhi, a few kilometres from the Delhi University North Campus. The children range in age from 5 to 15, with the majority attending primary and secondary schools. This is the story of my encounter with slum children and their way of life, and how they make sense of the education, we gave them. My interaction with the slum children transformed my perception

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of education. The instruction we gave them was not restricted to textbooks, but also included various additional activities such as music, games, and painting to help children acquire basic English language and grammar.

Community Support

Initially, getting along with the community was difficult. I questioned whether the team would ever win the locals' trust, and I still do at times. This was important since a youngster couldn't take part in

the learning process without the parents' permission. The parents of the local children were more than pleased to embrace us with much expectation despite the social and cultural divides that separated us from them. This was a sharp contrast to the impression I had initially formed, which surprised me much. And this hands-on experience broadened my thinking and enabled me to accept them in return. This paved the way for a bonding that would endure for the following three years that I would remain devoted to them.



Figure 1: Teachers with the parents and students

Making-Meaning through Education

We all know that education is important for a child's overall development. With this idea in mind, we approached schooling with these children in a somewhat different way than the

traditional method of imparting knowledge. The children's attention was gained with activities, singing, music, and the distribution of sweets towards the end of each lesson.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2 (a) and (b): Learning through fun and games

The personal engagement of the teachers in cleaning the surroundings started to leave positive impression on the children's ideas and minds. Earlier, the students used to be reluctant, or otherwise shy to sweep or clean the surroundings where classes were held. After a month, students began to assume responsibility on their own and would keep the classroom tidy and clean in preparation for our arrival. This made it quite simple for us to complete the tasks on schedule and without any fuss. This was a noticeable change in

their behaviour, which even surprised many of the parents as the behaviour of their child is beginning to change for good. And as a result, the bond that we share became solidified and something to be cherished.

To enable us to continue these good deeds we also provide fascinating awards for the students and allow minor competitions to draw their attention. This not only helps them boost their interests but also encourages them to do better next time. Depending on the pupils' achievements, prizes range from pencils to instrument boxes.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 3 (a), (b) and (c): Teachers engaged in cleaning the area meant for class and games

After the year, we had tokens for maximum attendance in class. And to ensure that the transfer of knowledge is not a burden to them, we practise a learner-centred pedagogy and create space for interaction and learning by doing.

Any negative views or remarks from teachers were excluded to ensure

that all pupils felt accommodated and included. We were required to always end the class or interaction on a good note. Furthermore, we also taught them to be disciplined and responsible sons and daughters both in school and at home. Eventually, some of the students began to excel in their performance at school.



Figure 4: (a), (b), (c): Teachers and students engaged in teaching-learning

Challenges

There were a few difficulties that I ran into when working with the kids. I wish to highlight a few difficulties by classifying them into tangible and abstract categories. The former concerned space, whereas the latter has to do with learning ability. Simply put, there wasn't enough room to shelter all the neighbourhood children. Hence, we decided to create a spot out of the only available space that was also being used as a dumping ground by the locals (Figure 1). On a rainy day, we had no choice but to cancel the class. Also, the youngsters' poor comprehension of

the basic English that is taught to them makes it extremely challenging. This was not a surprise as most of them goes to the neighbouring Hindi-medium government school and were fairly alien to conversing in English. Hence, we had to teach them the fundamentals of communication using both Hindi and English languages. It was particularly challenging for teacher volunteers who could not converse in both the languages. But the love and compassion for the children and their hunger to learn gave us the much-needed impetus to try and give our best no matter the circumstances.

CONCLUSION

My involvement with the kids in the slum has made me felt more fulfilled as a responsible citizen. What is done with love and compassion makes a difference. Also, it provided me the chance to learn outside of the confines of the classroom. However, as education encompasses all facets of learning, learning, therefore can occur anytime and anywhere. Education like this helps underprivileged children and raises their aspirations for better accomplishments, whether in terms

of their academic performance or their moral education and discipline, which is crucial for them to become a better citizen. One feels satisfied and meaningful when knowledge is shared with those in need. Furthermore, this noble task is in tune with NEP 2020 objectives, which aims to provide quality education for all regardless of their social and economic circumstances (pp. 3). Hence, it gives us every reason to forge ahead and contribute our part in changing lives that matter; and to do that in the lives of those children of the slums could be considered a noble act.

REFERENCES

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