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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

The significance of a good school education can never be overstated. For humans, learning is essential not just for survival but also for growth and development. Education is a life-long process. It begins with the family, friends and community - and most importantly, the school. The contents of school education shape a child's future. Countries the world over have developed specific types of curricula for overall growth of children. Apart from language, math, science and social science, emphasis is now given to the arts, physical eduction, sports, music and value-based education.

However, it is a matter of concern and shame that a large number of children, espcially in developing countries, still have no access to school education. Nearly 101 million children of primary school age were reported to be out of school in 2007. The largest out-of-school population is in sub-Saharan Africa, where around 45.5 million children of primary school age are out of school. It is followed by South Asia (35 million), the Middle East and North Africa (6.7 million), East Asia and the Pacific (4.7 million) and Latin America and the Caribbean (4.2 million). (UNICEF 2007)

Ricaardoe Di Done

On April 1, 2010, the Indian Government amended its Right to Education Act to guarantee free and compulsory education for all children between age of 6-14 years. I had the opportunity to personally discuss and interview a senior official in India, Mr. Kanhaiya lal Bairwa, who explained the various measures the Indian government has taken to increase primary school enrolment. These include providing free meals and books for elementary school children. To view the video, we invite you to visit www.tubefamily.com/society/en_ecoleIndeFree1.htm.

In this issue, we present a paper by *Child Trends* on the use of technology for out-of-school education programs. And lastly, a brief on the steps taken by the Cuban government to prioritize education, and the innovative strategies adopted by the country to make it not only 100% literate but also recognized as a leader in education the world over.

Right to Education Act:
Engineering a social revolution

The Right to Education Act will fumble and bumble through many an obstacle, some inherent and some deliberately created, but a beginning has been made, says RASHEEDA BHAGAT

The Right to Education Act has finally become a reality, and guarantees every Indian child the most basic fundamental right... the right to education. The Act — with its latest amendment — that became operational on April 1, guarantees every child in the 6-14 age group both free and compulsory education.

A 'decent education' has a lot to do with the child's schooling

While under the latest legislation government schools will continue to provide free education to all children, private schools will have to set aside at least 25 per cent seats for poor students free of cost. A National Commission for Elementary Education will be constituted to monitor all aspects of elementary education, including quality.

Furore from private schools

As expected, there has been a furore from private schools, particularly the elitist ones, which are protesting at the extra financial burden on them. Of course, the Education Minister, Mr Kapil Sibal, has assured these schools that what the government spends now on the elementary education of each child will be made available to them. But this is obviously peanuts for those schools that charge tens of thousands of rupees as annual fee.

There is little doubt that today, the poorest of poor in India aspire for some kind of quality education for their children. That is why private schools have mushroomed not only in the outskirts of cities but also in the larger villages, particularly in southern and western India.

Though these schools offer education of questionable quality, parents are willing to cut down even on food to send their children to these schools, forking out a couple of hundred rupees every month as fees. They obviously prefer private to government schools because even though they might not have the best of teachers, at least the managements ensure that teachers attend school and take classes, something the government schools have failed to do over the years.

On the face of it, surely it warms everyone's heart to guarantee compulsory, free and quality education to every child, irrespective of the status of the parents. It is a crying shame that of the 200 million children in the 6-14 age group, barely half manage to get even eight years of elementary education.

Decent education?

But "decent education" means more than getting a degree in hand, even if it is from a relatively good university. It has a lot to do with the child's schooling. The care, attention and rigour with which the teacher nurtures the young and impressionable minds, inculcating in them a spirit of inquiry, a passion for reading beyond text-books and a deep desire to seek knowledge beyond the boundaries of school/college walls is what is real education.

Only a degree certificate that is embellished by these qualifications, and not mere marks, helps the young graduates/professionals to compete and get good jobs. Ask all those graduates/ engineers from disadvantaged homes who have managed to get degrees but continue to struggle to find jobs, what it means to have an education that gives you articulation skills, knowledge and, above all, self-confidence to stand up and

speak for yourself. Those of us who are the beneficiaries of a really good educational system, bolstered by a supportive, even if rigorous, back-up from home, can't even imagine the difference.

Of course, it is easy to be sceptical about the high-sounding targets laid down in the RTE Act. The government flagship programme — Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) — launched in 2001, aimed to achieve universalisation of elementary education, as mandated by the 86th Amendment to the Constitution, making free and compulsory education a Fundamental Right. One of the SSA's objectives — all children should complete five years of primary schooling by 2007 — has come nowhere near realisation, pushing even further away the goal laid down in the SSA of universal retention by 2010.

Sceptics

But just because the SSA failed to come close to its goals does not mean that we give up on millions of children — particularly from the relatively backward States of Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, who have continued to remain outside the education system. Of course, there will be huge teething problems; just imagine the number of slum children from Delhi or other metros who will march up for admission to elitist schools in the category of a Delhi Public School.

Even if a fraction of poor children is able to get into schools which offer quality education, just imagine the social revolution that will gradually unfold. This is certainly an idea whose time has come.

The poor and disadvantaged have oodles of patience, but as one section of society greedily grabs all the fruits of India's progress and development only for itself, it is only a matter of time before the other section decides it is fed up of being only an onlooker. History has many examples of people grabbing or looting what is not equitably distributed to them.

There may be a thousand questions that remain unanswered, the most pertinent being on finding, training and motivating teachers, but they can't be cited as the reason for continuing to ignore the aspirations of the poor. For don't forget, their patience is running thin.

(Published in the Hindu Businessline editorial, 6 April 2010 - rasheeda@thehindu.co.in)

Incorporating Technology into Out-of-School Programs:

BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES

Ashleigh Collins, M.A., and Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Ph.D.

Children and youth are growing up in an increasingly technology-saturated world. Digital devices, the Internet, and interactive media have become ubiquitous. As a result, young people are not only becoming expert users of technological devices, but technology and technologically-based learning environments are extending student learning beyond the conventional classroom.

WHY USE TECHNOLOGY IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Technology can strengthen the activities offered by out-of-school time programs and broaden participants' educational opportunities in a variety of ways. It can be used to:

- **Supplement in-class instruction:** The opportunity to hone technologically-based skills can provide program participants with opportunities to practice and apply new concepts and, subsequently, prepare for a technologically-based society and workforce. For example, video production students at Bemidji High School in Minnesota, film, edit, and broadcast the school's televised Friday announcements, which they call "Lumberjack Live." The experience spurred many of the students who participated in the project to study mass communications in college or become freelance videographers following high school graduation.
- **Build links with online information.** Internet and computer software can provide students with a wealth of easily accessible information by linking related information to online documents. One example is an online article on President Obama's first trip to Europe. Such links allow students to connect with relevant information, and research has found that such connections promote knowledge-building.

● **Provide information to program participants in diverse locations and time zones.** Internet access can unite youth from urban, rural, and suburban communities across the country and link youth with their counterparts around the world. Online resources can also expose children and youth to cultural and locale-specific information that they may otherwise not encounter. For example, through the Global Kids out-of-school time program, high school students developed a computer game based on life in Haiti that allows players to explore the challenges children in developing countries face in obtaining an education.

● **Increase engagement in learning.** The use of technology has also been associated with increases in child and youth engagement. Students using technologies, such as the tablet personal computer and educational software, reported that the experience enhanced their ability to learn and made learning enjoyable.

● **Allow program participants the flexibility to learn at their own pace.** For example, programs that have incorporated math and reading computer software into their activities have found that this practice allowed students of differing ability levels to pace their online learning in a way that was appropriate for them.

Internet access can unite youth from urban, rural, and suburban communities across the country and link youth with their counterparts around the world. Online resources can also expose children and youth to cultural and locale-specific information that they may otherwise not encounter.

● **Increase parental involvement.** Providing program participants' parents or guardians access to the Internet (to check their e-mail, conduct job searches, and monitor the academic performance of their children) has been used successfully to promote parental involvement.

● **Promote program participants' academic success.** Some studies have found that academic achievement is higher when students receive computer-based instruction than it is when they receive traditional classroom instruction. Moreover, after using computers for educational purposes, students often rated their academic performance higher, felt that subsequent class assignments were easier, and had a greater desire to study the subject.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH USING TECHNOLOGY?

● **Expense.** Incorporating technology into out-of-school time program activities requires sufficient funds to purchase and maintain the technology. For example, programs must be able to cover not only the costs of purchasing computers, but also the costs of software, Internet access, computer maintenance, and other hardware (e.g., printers and scanners).

● **Staff training.** Despite the prevalence of technology in society, program staff are often ill-equipped to integrate technology into program activities.

● **Planning time.** Some staff members have found that it can be time-consuming to plan activities that seamlessly incorporate technology, while appropriately differentiating activities for program participants of varying

Program participants can use computer-based programs to follow developments over time, whether it is how plants are growing or how a community service project is progressing. For example, computer software enabled third-grade students in Honolulu to create a video (complete with narration, digital pictures, and on-camera interviews) to chronicle their class garden.

academic abilities, interests, and technological experiences.

- **Risks.** Accessibility to the Internet has heightened the concern of adults (parents, educators, and child care providers especially) that children and youth could be susceptible to online predators or inappropriate material, such as that depicting excessive violence or pornography.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN BE USED TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES TO TECHNOLOGY USE?

Strategy 1: Offer training to staff on using technology. Staff members are more likely to incorporate technology into their regular activities when they receive training on how to use it. Effective training should include an explanation of the theory behind using technology in program activities; a demonstration of how to incorporate technology into the program; and opportunities for staff members to practice and receive feedback on technology use.

Strategy 2: Provide sufficient technical support. When staff members receive ongoing technical support, they are more likely to integrate new skills into their regular practice effectively. Support could include having an information technology specialist on staff, allowing staff members access to phone or online technical support, or having more technologically savvy staff members coach their less technologically savvy colleagues.

Strategy 3: Provide guidelines and role modelling to program participants in the use of technology. Program controls and media literacy can reduce child and youth exposure to harmful media content. It is important for programs to establish guidelines for participants' technology use to ensure they are exposed to age-appropriate media and in appropriate amounts.

Strategy 4: Partner with schools and businesses to purchase or maintain program technology. Partnerships with universities, foundations,

and businesses can help offset the costs of purchasing and maintaining technology.

WHAT ARE SOME CREATIVE USES OF TECHNOLOGY IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Technology can be used to extend student learning in a variety of creative ways. Out-of-school time programs have found the following uses to be especially beneficial:

Creative Use 1: To reinforce program participants' reading and comprehension skills. A variety of programs have used technology-based programs to provide children and youth with practice in phonics, story comprehension, and vocabulary-building.

Creative Use 2: To strengthen participants' writing skills. Computer software allows children to brainstorm writing ideas through the development of computer-generated graphic organizers. Educators have found that such Internet "publications" can increase student motivation to produce quality writing.

Creative Use 3: To chronicle long-term projects. Program participants can use computer-based programs to follow developments over time, whether it is how plants are growing or how a community service project is progressing. For example, computer software enabled third-grade students in Honolulu to create a video (complete with narration, digital pictures, and on-camera interviews) to chronicle their class garden.

Creative Use 4: To conduct research. Online video-streaming (such as that available through the Rhode Island and Las Vegas Public Broadcasting Services) offer online videos that correspond to local social studies, science, math, health, and language arts content standards. For example, Caribbean Conservation Corporation, a marine life conservation organization, allows children to adopt and track a sea turtle through its migration process.

Creative Use 5: To help participants explore the world around them. Video technology can involve program participants in the exploration of their world through filmmaking, digital artwork, and online instruction. Online video can also expose program participants to new aspects of their world. For example, students can watch online performances by professional musicians through a variety of outlets, such as the Web site of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.85

Creative Use 6: To deliver and receive art education. Out-of-school time programs have incorporated technology into photography activities. Through the First Exposures program, 11-to 18-year-olds in San Francisco participate in weekly photography classes and are mentored by a professional photographer.

Creative Use 7: To prepare youth for technology-based careers. Media technology can be used to offer professional training in media production. The Dallas Media Youth Channel sponsors a weeklong Summer Media Camp, where children and teens write the script, shoot the video, and make the storyboard for television programs later shown on the channel. The channel also offers young people paid internships that enable them to help manage programming events, perform administrative tasks, participate in ongoing projects, and contribute to production needs.

CONCLUSION

Despite the potential challenges associated with technology use in out-of-school time programs, computer software, Internet, and electronic equipment (including digital cameras and television broadcast equipment) can extend student learning in out-of-school time programs. Program partnerships, staff training, and proactive steps taken to plan against inappropriate Internet content can help maximize the diverse benefits and minimize the challenges of technology use in out-of-school time programming.

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.."

- Alvin Tofler

The Education System in Cuba

The educational program of Cuba has received international recognition by UNESCO and even other governments. The Cuban government has reiterated its willingness to share the advances in its education system with all the countries of the world offering UNESCO the new methodologies created by Cuban educational specialists.

Some of the statistical indicators for Cuba are as follows:

- Every school classroom in Cuba is equipped with a television and a VCR for every 100 students. A special television channel on education supplements this.
- Cuban schools and colleges, in addition to providing free education, provide free educational material such as notebooks, writing material, etc. as well.
- There are currently 400,000 students enrolled in schools. Ninety nine percent of the students currently attend school, with a 99.9 % retention rate.
- The student/teacher ratio is 13.6 to 1, that is one teacher for every 13.6 students.
- There are approximately 45 Universities and institutes of higher education with an enrollment of close to 250,000 and with a total of 24,800 professors.
- Nearly 74% of the children enrolled in primary schools in Cuba, are taught in classrooms of no more than 20 students each.
- The literacy rate is currently 100 % with an average 12-grade level.

History: A 1953 Census Survey of the Republic of Cuba indicates that the Adult literacy rate in Cuba was about 75%, placing it fourth in Latin America behind Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica. The figure, however, did not reveal a school enrolment ratio as low as 51.6%, with nearly 80% of the rural population having an education of third grade or less. Discrimination was rampant. For example, only 0.05% of blacks are indicated to have achieved higher education during this period. The few Universities that existed in Havana, were accessible only to the affluent.

The post-revolution government inherited a country where 60% of the population was semi-illiterate. There was gross disparity in rural and urban literacy levels with urban illiteracy being only 11.6, while rural illiteracy being an incredible 41.7, with less than .5 percent graduating from high school or vocational schools. To combat illiteracy the new Government took the following steps:

- It formed educational brigades composed mostly of high school and university students. These were students, known as *brigadistas*, who volunteered to help *campesinos* (peasants) in rural and in sometimes the remotest places in Cuba to learn how to read and write.
- Groups were formed within the workplaces, such as in factories and shops to help the workers learn to read and write. It afforded the workers a little time off at the workplace in this endeavor. In addition, night schools were initiated and workers encouraged to attend.
- New goals were set in educational levels, with the first goal being 6th grade followed by in later years to 9th grade and ultimately 12th grade - what it is today.
- Schools were constructed on a war footing. In addition, old police stations and army barracks were converted into schools. All in all, about 25,000 new schools were created. In rural areas where schools did not exist, new schools were built; even the remotest parts of Cuba now had schools.
- All the schools on the island were made free and accessible to all.
- The Cuban National Special Education Program introduced schools for the handicapped and students with learning disabilities.
- Unlike the pre-revolution period, where there were 3 or 4 universities, most of them in Havana, new universities and technical schools were opened, now accessible and free of charge to all.
- Unlike the past where day care centers were for the well to do, new day care centers were opened and made affordable with the family paying very modest fees (based on one's salary).

In Cuba children do not have to suffer the exploitation and violence children suffer in other nations. Children can grow up in a safe environment, free of drugs and violence. They can grow up having a happy childhood. Lastly UN and UNICEF studies confirms that Cuba's educational system is one of the best in the world; and definitely in the third world where no one comes close.■

UNICEF cites Urgency of Education for all

Marking the Tenth Anniversary of the United Nations Girl's Education Initiative (UNGEI)

UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake meets with several boys from a nearby 'daara' (Koranic school) who also attend some classes at the HLM4 school complex in Dakar, Senegal

Surrounded by the concrete bricks and flood-stained walls of her school, Anta, 11, attends classes and dreams of becoming a paediatrician. She knows she is lucky. But many of her friends have not been so fortunate, Anta told UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake during his visit to her school in Senegal in May for a global conference on girls' education and gender equality.

Closing the gender gap

In the impoverished HLM neighbourhood of Senegal's capital, Dakar, many children are forced to drop out of school in order to work. Girls suffer disproportionately from these economic challenges.

Mr. Lake visited with Anta and her classmates as part of a tour of schools around Dakar, where he is attending the 'Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality' conference organized by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI).

The three-day meeting brings together over 200 global experts with the goal of unlocking quality education opportunities and closing the gender gap worldwide. The event also marks the 10th anniversary of UNGEI, which was launched by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000.

Girls bear the burden

Although about 72 per cent of primary school-aged girls and boys are enrolled in primary grades, girls suffer steeper drop-out rates as they reach adolescence. Only 18 per cent of secondary school-aged girls are enrolled in secondary school, compared to 23 per cent of boys in the same age group.

"I see a lot of girls who come to school, but their families take them out before they complete their exams," said Penda Diop, a teacher of 12- and 13 year-olds at Anta's school. "In our culture, often the girls are taken out of school when their families encounter financial difficulties. It is more important that the boys stay in school than the girls."

Mr. Lake also toured an Islamic religious school, known as a 'daara'. An estimated 50,000 Senegalese children receive their education in such Koranic schools. Situated between a highway and trash-filled drainage ditch, the HLM neighbourhood houses 14 daaras in shacks made of tin and wood. The schools offer Islamic instruction to young students – known as 'talibés' – but also serve to fill the gap where formal schooling is not available. The system is open to abuse, however. In some daaras, teachers called 'marabouts' send children onto the streets to beg, a common sight on the streets of Dakar.

'Cascading benefits'

Much has changed for many of the world's children since the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Mr. Lake said at the opening of UNGEI conference. But if progress continues at the current pace, he emphasized, there will still be some 56 million primary school-aged children out of school by 2015. More than half of them will be girls, he said, and a large percentage will be from minority groups.

Mr. Lake also noted that the girls and boys he met showed remarkable resilience in the face of difficult conditions. "Everywhere I go, I admire these children, who smile in these circumstances," he said.■

(http://www.unicef.org)