

Sister Cyril's Compassionate Vision by Ashoka.org

Sister Cyril is showing how middle class schools can integrate the poor living around them into their educational mainstream, to their mutual benefit. This profile was prepared when Cyril Mooney was elected to the Ashoka Fellowship in 1990.

The New Idea

As principal of Loreto School in the Sealdah area of Calcutta, Sister Cyril has been able to realize many of her (and the National Policy Planners) dreams within its compounds: She has beaten the existing polarity in Indian education by bringing together children of "good schools" with those usually locked out of the charmed circle, to their mutual benefit. "The ripple effect" she's demonstrating - founded on the belief that everyone receives to give - has helped to transform the school into a center for community development rather than continuing as a stand-offish academic ivory tower. She has also managed to maintain a minimal dropout rate among children of the most diverse standings - academically, financially, even culturally and religiously.

These achievements demonstrate something important, how the number of children benefiting from one school may be raised at no additional cost to the nation. Having developed a highly successful case example, Sister Cyril would now like to structure her cost-effective, new methodology so that it can be adopted easily by other schools. To the degree she succeeds, she will be helping to bridge the deep chasm that separates India's privileged children from those born to poor parents.

Soon after she took over as principal of the school in 1979, Sister Cyril began introducing one leveling idea after another. The "Outreach" programme, which is now virtually a part of the school's core curriculum, comprises weekly visits to village schools by her school's full time students from Class Five upwards. There, in a delightful role reversal, they become "teachers", maintaining registers on each of their "pupils". Both groups climb up through the classes together. The work continues during the monsoons, and there is systematic follow-up. It is one of the rare practical and effective ways of drawing urban and rural youngsters, now in far distant worlds, together.

A "drop-in" system by which slum children can enter the school at any stage, the use of school facilities and students to teach pavement-dwelling children every afternoon, the operation of a simple labor exchange, the formation of Mother's Clubs to impart literacy, income-generating skills and knowledge about childcare, and the reorientation of the rules and structures which used to make financially disadvantaged children feel inferior are further, mutually reinforcing elements of Sister Cyril's magic.

The Problem

The deep differences in Indian society are generally reflected in and reinforced by the school system: If poor youngsters are in school at all, it is in a separate and terribly unequal place.

A good part of India's substantial investment in education is in institutions for the elite and middle classes. If these institutions could reach out effectively to nearby poor children and the schools serving them, they just might help India close its persistent, deep class and opportunity gaps.

The barriers to this happening are formidable. Most schools feel their facilities are overloaded already. Parents and children worry about a dilution of effort lowering their school's reputation and standards – and their performance on national exams that open and close their future opportunities. Moreover, will the young students be safe? Is there a risk of disease? Would such a program overload already fully committed teachers? How will the schools who now serve the poor, be it in the villages or in a municipal system, respond? How does one create a coherent school community out of such deeply diverse elements? Even if one principal decides to take all this on, will his or her replacement be as committed?

The Strategy

A working model, especially one as extensive and successful as the Sealdah school, is critical to the argument. It is also necessary as a laboratory to test further developments of the model. Consequently, although Sister Cyril is training others to take charge of significant parts of her workload at the school, she is committed to ensuring its continued success.

However, the time has now come to spread her model broadly. Her first step in this direction will be to prepare a practical manual to help school principals think through the myriad issues they will have to confront if they are to reorient their schools along these lines. Once she completes this manual, she plans to develop a syllabus on practical social awareness and community-building which she hopes will help teachers and students play their roles. Just as her school provides training for teachers from the surrounding area, she's also hoping to produce materials that would help other schools play this role.

These materials will help, but ultimately they are supports for Sister Cyril's main thrust, persuading other schools to make the leap to her model. She's had a few initial partial successes in Calcutta. She now must reach out systematically to the wide variety of "good" schools across the country, be they Muslim, secular, Christian, or governmental.

The Person

Sister Cyril has been teaching since 1956. She spent the first fourteen of these years in Lucknow, chiefly at the Intermediate School. During India's troubled beginning of the 1970s she moved to Calcutta. A few years later her concern for the inequalities so vividly displayed around her found expression in a Social Justice exhibition she organized. She then conducted a survey of the health and welfare of children in the region. It played a role in the subsequent launch of the Child in Need Institute, now a very significant child welfare organization serving poor children from both slums and villages.

She became principal of Loreto Sealdah in 1979 and promptly started the experiments that have turned it into the extraordinary institution it now is. Ten years ago the school had 730 girls enrolled, now there are 1300 – not taking into account the larger number of community, village and street children (and mothers) she and her students now reach as well.