



ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

Asian Forum

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From ATD Fourth World Regional Team (Patricia and Claude Heyberger)

At the beginning of a new year, it is traditional to exchange wishes. Although we were not able to send each of you a personal message, our good wishes for the Year of the Horse are sincere. May you all be given constant strength, confidence, and acknowledgment in your daily activities! The tradition is also to share expectations and plans for the future. That's why we want to tell you about a very important concern that ATD Fourth World has decided to engage in for the next few years: "Fostering a learning environment for all based on partnership and cooperation."

This campaign has been inspired by the outcomes of the ATD Fourth World Participatory Action-Research Project to evaluate the impact of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was conducted worldwide over the past 2 years and directly involved people living in extreme poverty as the primary research participants.

The two articles from Bangladesh and the Philippines in this letter are extracts of the Asian contributions for the final report of the research which will be released in March 2014. These contributions clearly underline that from the perspective of people living in extreme poverty, better relationships and cooperation among learners, parents, communities and teachers could make education much more profitable for all. Participants from other continents have come up with similar findings.

Consequently ATD Fourth World Common Ambitions for 2014-2017 will give priority to:

- Identify existing life skills of families living in poverty and how they complement the formal school knowledge.*
- Support families as the first place of education, as well as their initiatives for the education of their children.*
- Addressing discrimination and stigmatization in places of learning that increase children's fear of failure and prevent parents from communicating with the world of education.*
- Promoting cooperation among learners, addressing the fact that competition can undermine the school experience for both its "winners" and "losers."*

We believe that such changes can be widely instilled in practice. Let's support each other by sharing experiences of cooperative learning and teaching!

Promoting Equitable Learning: "Every Mind Counts"

http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/IMG/pdf/EC_PDF_ENG_with_links.pdf

Education happens everywhere where people act together and learn from each other

Lenen Rahaman founded in 1997 the grassroots NGO MATI (which means "soil" in Bengali) in the North of Bangladesh. MATI is working in collaboration with people living below the national poverty line, who comprise roughly 42% of the country's 160 million inhabitants. In the following article, Lenen describes some of the challenges and opportunities MATI faces in its efforts to promote cooperative education in Bangladesh.

MATI's central approach is to define what "development" means for those with whom we work and to plan and implement interventions together. For instance, we support activities in a UN-sponsored *Millennium Village*, assisting villagers to improve their living conditions according to local priorities and in line with the framework of the Millennium Development Goals. Following a participatory approach is fundamental to MATI's work, and over the years we have witnessed numerous improvements in areas ranging from education, access to safe water, and debt-reduction, among others.

However, Bangladesh continues to face development challenges, especially with regard to widening access to adequate education and training for the country's poorest populations. Despite government pledges to provide free primary education for all citizens, the country's official education system often fails to prevent discrimination against poor and marginalized groups viewed as outside the "socially-accepted" norm. For instance, many schools are reluctant to enroll children from poor families; if they are admitted, teachers often ignore their personal difficulties, such as school absences due to domestic issues, such as harvesting, having less time for studying at home, or being without money for

tuition and books. Because classes are too full, poor children end up sitting at the back, and then lose interest.

On the other hand, whether it is completing enrollment paperwork, dealing with academic officials, or providing assistance with homework, poor families frequently are unable to provide the support their children urgently require with their school matters. In addition, because children from poor households are often needed as additional income-earners, some must resort to terminating their studies early when their families experience financial difficulties. Ultimately, many children of poor families do not attend school, or drop out before completing their primary



The preschool teacher in the community center

education.

Certainly, these families attach great value to their children's education for the costs of which they are ready to face great sacrifices. MATI's experience in the Millennium Village provides an important and vivid example. Initially, a number of children in the Millennium Village were unable to enroll in school because there were no preschool options available (Bangladeshi children are required to attend preschool in order to be eligible for government-sponsored education) and the school of another NGO had only few places. To address

this challenge, the villagers worked together to build a small community center in the middle of the village. The community center hosts one room for preschool, and another for adult training classes. Every year 40 children (ages 4-6) attend the preschool, in two shifts (20 each). The teacher is a literate woman from the community.

Parents of the children have the option of sitting in the courtyard and observing what is being taught, or having community discussions about their expectations of the school and its teachers. The villagers view the school as a crucial step in ensuring their children receive a quality education, preparing them for their future studies in

government-sponsored schools.

However, the school system remains a top-down approach from the teacher towards the children. That children also educate (their parents, their siblings, their classmates, the society) is often ignored.

Yet education happens everywhere where people act together and learn from each other. Also illiterate parents are the educators of their children. They teach them many things about social behavior, agricultural knowledge/skills, traditional trades, oral history of the community, songs and stories, environment...

Establishing a good relationship between parents and teachers is seen as important, but not a natural process

The present article elaborates more specifically the issue of stigma and discrimination towards students and parents experiencing extreme poverty. It was presented at the Workshop "Partners in Development: Listening to the voices of families living in extreme poverty" organized last October 2013 in Manila by UNICEF Philippines, Council for the Welfare of Children and ATD Fourth World.

During interviews and group sessions around the research, it was identified that children living in extreme poverty come from places where they are surrounded by people who have failed at school. Many of them join school with very low self confidence in their ability to learn and are anxious about making mistakes.

On the other side, teachers are responsible for managing large classes and workloads, which often make it difficult for them to provide sufficient attention to each respective child. Some children feel neglected to such an extent that they 'give up' trying. They are 'allowed' to pass to the next grade without learning.

Children and parents described acts of humiliation and discrimination, including bullying encountered in the school by classmates and discriminatory acts by teaching and non-teaching staff because of the place where they live, because of their appearance, their inability to provide uniforms or to complete projects in a timely manner.

Students are often classified by section in each level, creating competition to belong to the top of the class. Hard working students that excel in class are publicly praised and get special opportunities. These practices increase the stigma and gaps between the rich and the poor, the 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' students, the 'good' and 'bad' schools.

For the participants in the research, establishing a good relationship between parents and teachers is seen as important, but not a natural process. "Closeness" to teachers is easily interpreted by other parents as an attempt at favoritism. In addition, some parents reported that when they dared to go and visit teachers regarding issues of mistreatment or abuse claimed by their children, they were not taken seriously, or were asked to keep silent or were sometimes even threatened with negative consequences on their child's report card.

Many parents from backgrounds of poverty lack the self-esteem and confidence which affects their participation in teachers-parents meeting and parents' organizations where the above mentioned issues could be addressed. It results in parents either avoiding appointments, or attending in silence, even if they disagree with proposals and outcomes of the meetings.

It has to be stressed that parents participating in the study also recalled personal, positive relationships with a number of teachers, guidance counselors or other school staff, encouraging them to regularly send their children to school. Some children with learning difficulties have been described as feeling well supported by teachers who provide additional instruction after school or for free.



A day of dialogue with civil society organizations, officials of the Philippine Government and people living in poverty in the Philippines—about 100 people in all.

The research participants had the opportunity to examine a number of educational programs, mostly alternative, informal modes of instruction, which are implemented in their communities. The study confirms that the more these programs create good, respectful, fair, and strong relations between teachers, students and the surrounding community, real transformation of the students (and parents) can be observed.

Some recommendations and actions proposed by the participants:

- Establishment of quality relations with students and parents including those living in difficult conditions, as well as coordination with social workers, NGOs, etc., should be included in the training and monitoring of teachers.
- Allot the most talented, passionate and flexible teachers to areas and students coping with the most difficulties, and provide these teachers with sufficient support.
- Make the learning experience as fun and positive as possible for all students; bolster the confidence of the students in their learning ability; encourage their different skills, and learn from their experiences.
- Develop learning programs that promote cooperation among students and encourage the practice of mixing children of different social levels; instill and sustain the sense of solidarity between the advanced and less advanced students, and make the parents aware of the value of this solidarity between students so that they may also foster it in their social sphere.
- Modify the rewarding practices, including all students for their specific talents and efforts.