

SIR SHAPURJI BILLIMORIA FOUNDATION, MUMBAI

In our contemporary cultural climate, where inequity is often taken as one of those things that we have to live with, those who prioritize issues related to development often set education to one side. However, the fact remains that the right to education is a fundamental human right. Denying education to a child is abrogation of the child's rights, a denial of a whole host of future opportunities.

Here is a story of how sensitivity to the striking inequities of the educational landscape of this country came to be shaped into an educational program. The Sir Shapurji Billimoria Foundation (SSBF), whose motto is, "Change unearths challenges", has been supported by the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust from 1999 onwards.¹ The figure at its cutting edge is Roda Billimoria, a woman shaped by the intensity of her quest.

In an educational system where teachers are pressured to quickly disseminate huge loads of knowledge, the distinction between understanding and dissemination is blurred. The textbook and its commitment to memory dominate classroom transactions. The all-powerful exams that determine the child's future await and they are largely a test of the efficiency of memorization. As a result, everything within the textbook acquires legitimacy – all else, especially life's experiences are not recognized as part of the world of knowledge. Understanding as an educational goal goes out of focus, the system is inflexible and unsympathetic to all who cannot fit in.

Where children with differing capacities go to school together under the same conditions, it is inevitable that special children, the gifted and the disabled, become discouraged and at some stage are squeezed out, if not ejected outright, from the system of education through the mechanism of failure in exams. What does a committed teacher do to provide the children in her charge with a meaningful classroom

experience which they can carry over into their lives whether they go beyond elementary school or not?

SSBF began in the early 1990s with an exploration of the possibilities for education of special children with a thought to mainstreaming these kids. From a series of workshops, this developed into short-term, in-service courses, largely attended voluntarily by teachers seeking such knowledge, though some were sent by their schools. This led to the formulation of a two-year, pre-service Diploma in Integrated Education (D Ed). Awarded through SNDT University, the diploma is well recognized, for its alumni are an asset to any school they join. The SSBF's approach is to integrate all children and to mainstream the methods of special education into the system as a whole.

The D Ed course attempts to address the needs of a wide range of children within the spectrum of their diversities. The course equips the student teacher to teach at the elementary level, and to develop a deep understanding of the varied needs and skills of special and other children. On this basis, they have to develop appropriate classroom programs. For the student teacher it provides a space for self-discovery and a chance to develop her or his own humanity and creative impulses.

This course is recognized by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) – the apex



Teacher training session in progress

body for teacher training in India. Its innovative features include the integration of multiple disciplines – health sciences, therapeutic techniques, psychology, child development, social sciences – into teacher-training. As the creator of this course, Roda Billimoria aims to raise standards and expectations all around. She hopes that the students will carry this self-confident professionalism over into the schools, when they become teachers.

The teachers emerging from the diploma course have evolved alternative training methods. They have devised innovative teaching-learning materials, which meet the specific requirements of learners with varying abilities. For example, to teach geography to visually impaired children, the teacher trainees made a map with surfaces of varying textures to denote different geographical areas.

Other institutions and agencies are now drawing on the expertise built by the Foundation. Two Mumbai-based teachers' training colleges have requested SNDT to allow them to implement the D Ed course and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), which has recently started a Master's program in Elementary Education, has asked the Foundation to prepare a course on education of children with special needs.

Currently the team at the Sir Shapurji Billimoria Foundation is setting up a comprehensive institute of integrated education on a campus in Navi Mumbai. It will have a teachers' training institute with a demonstration school attached, where all streams of children

will be integrated. This school will involve the local community of parents as participants in the educational process and give the student teachers a model of working in harmony with the community. Additionally, there will be a unit for research and documentation and a resource-cum-study centre open not just to teachers but also parents. These will together provide a playing field of learning and practice, a living demonstration of the educational ideals that inspire this effort.

Roda Billimoria turned her concern about education as a human right denied to millions of children, into a goal. She then systematically worked to create the means to reach the goal by experimenting and creating a curriculum, simultaneously building a committed team, supportive schools and sympathetic policy makers. This got transformed to the building of an institutional model, which became influential. It could then get borrowed, translated and replicated by a range of takers.

In the meantime the original institution continues to innovate. It continues to produce new graduates who find work for themselves, carrying with them the vision in which they were trained, changing the lives of some children somewhere. "Throwing pebbles, making ripples," is how Roda described it, in her typical way. She will certainly make more than ripples with the currents she has set off.

¹ The current grant of Rs 44 million was sanctioned in early 2006. Previously, grants totalling Rs 8.29 million have been made to the Foundation.



Young learners at a maths workshop



Workshop on teaching aids