

Bringing Education to the Dharavi slums of India

Early Childhood

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You may have seen the recent movie, Slumdog Millionaire. It was shot in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. The movie began with shots of a section of Mumbai called Dharavi. Dharavi is known as the largest slum in Asia, and is home to some 700,000 people. The conditions in Dharavi are tragic for many of its inhabitants, particularly the children, most of whom have little to look forward to in life.

I know Dharavi because I have worked with the National Resource Centre for Inclusion (NRCI) in Mumbai. Under the leadership of Dr. Mithu Alur, NRCI is giving many young children in Dharavi a chance for a better life. Dr. Alur and her colleagues have begun an inclusive early childhood program (Ugam) in Dharavi.

The Dharavi Ugam program is the most exciting program in inclusive education I have seen anywhere. I have been privileged to visit the program frequently as a consultant, and, working with the Marsha Forest Centre of Toronto, to provide financial support.

Today, some 16 individual preschool centers (Anganwadis) have been set up in Dharavi. A morning and an afternoon program runs in each, with about 50 children each half day. At present, 16 individual Anganwadis are operating. If my figures are correct (and the figures are changing as the program continues to expand), up to 1600 children are being educated through the Ugam program each year.

The first step in setting up the program was to approach the Street Bosses in Dharavi. Street Bosses are people who control parts of the slum. Without their agreement, it is very difficult to begin any new program in Dharavi and to have it safe from various

problems. The Street Bosses see value for the children in the program and have been very supportive of its initiation and expansion.

The teachers in the Anganwadis are not typical teachers. They are mothers from the slum who receive some pedagogical training from NRCI. They are supported by a number of NRCI staff who visit and support the Anganwadis on a regular basis. Continuing professional development ensures that the mother-teachers extend their skills.

The Ugam program runs on a shoe string. The Anganwadis are very limited in space. You would not see so many children in such small spaces in Canada. The children write on small, old-fashioned slates. Books and paper, even pencils and crayons, are far too expensive. Only a few rudimentary teaching supplies are available. The mother-teachers do their best to create teaching aids from whatever materials they can access.

As I write this it sounds very bleak. However, a visit to an Anganwadi denies this. They are happy places, full of confident learners. The children's faces beam as they go about their lessons and as they receive visitors. They dress their best on their birthdays and ^{the} holy days of their ^{various} religions. Wearing their finery gives them an opportunity to shine.

Each Anganwadi is attended by a diversity of children. All are from the slum and are what we would call "of low socio-economic status". The "girl child" is a focus, as many girls in India, and particularly in slum environments, do not have access to education. Another focus is children with disabilities. A variety of religions are represented. The program is inclusive in many ways.

Children learn from four different curricula. They study an early childhood curriculum based on the English model. They study ~~a~~ locally developed nutrition and personal hygiene curricula. As you might expect, nutrition and hygiene are major

concerns in a slum environment. Lastly they study English. A degree of competency in English opens up many opportunities.

The children do not miss their classes if at all possible. Their parents know that an education can be a passport out of the slum. Having their children go to an Anganwadi is a sacrifice for families. Children, no matter how young, are part of the workforce of Dharavi. The families are sacrificing part of their incomes by sending their children to the program.

Slumdog Millionaire portrayed the dark side of the Dharavi slum. And it is a daunting and challenging environment. But the early childhood program started by Mithu Alur and her colleagues show another side of Dharavi. There is personal striving for improvement and willingness of the individual, no matter how young, to work hard and sacrifice in search of a better life.

As I said at the beginning, the Ugam program is the most exciting inclusive education program I have seen anywhere. It is an example of what can be done.

Why is it that so many Canadian educators believe that inclusion of all ~~all~~ learners, including those with disabilities, is impossible? Our educators point to lack of funding, lack of teacher training, child behaviour and other problems. The Ugam program in Dharavi proves to us that nothing is impossible with a vision, sound leadership and belief that ~~at~~ no child should be segregated for education. Perhaps our Canadian problem in so many places ~~is~~ points more to lack of vision and leadership than the reasons ~~for~~ so many of our educators' advance.