



# A Passion for Success:

## Beating the Odds in a New Delhi Slum

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Janet K. Museveni, First lady of Uganda, opened the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in Halifax in 2000 with the observation that “globalization presents, on the one hand, several opportunities, and on the other daunting challenges particularly in the field of education”.<sup>1</sup> Just a few months earlier, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 180 nations committed themselves to a profound goal: providing quality education for all the world’s children by 2015. “More than 113 million children have no access to primary education, 880 million adults are illiterate, gender discrimination continues to permeate education systems, and the quality of learning and the acquisition of human skills fall far short of the aspirations and needs of individuals and societies.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing short of heroic efforts by developed and developing nations will be required to meet this goal.



In Canada the challenges that globalization presents for education are most often described in terms of raising standards, improving the efficiency of institutions, improving accountability, and the ever increasing need for post-secondary education – all seen as necessary for Canada to be competitive in an integrated global economy. Developing nations describe their challenges differently. In many countries universal basic education is

still a distant dream; adult literacy rates, especially among women, are appalling; and solutions to deal with extreme poverty may be as far off as ever.

India is one of those countries. With a population of close to one billion, it is home to at least a quarter of the world's poor people and almost half of the world's illiterates. But for some children, visionary educational leadership is bringing new hope – and we have much to learn from their experience. In the

slums of New Delhi, a vibrant, informal school is flourishing: the Katha School of Entrepreneurship (KSE). The children, most of whom have never been to school before, make rapid progress, often out-performing their peers in state schools. KSE has grown rapidly from an initial enrollment of fifteen students ten years ago to 1200 today.

In the beginning only boys came forward. Families in the community, particularly fathers, do not expect or want their daughters to go to school. The girls work alongside their mothers, often starting very early in the morning; by the time they are eight or nine years old, many have almost sole responsibility for supervising younger siblings. And yet, although boys and girls cannot mix together in school, today KSE has approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in attendance, from preschool to secondary school graduation.

Ms. Saraswati, the Executive Director of this not-for-profit, non government

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school, explained that she had accomplished the enrollment of girls by 'subversive' means. She began with income generation projects for the local women, believing that, if the school could get mothers out of the home, their school aged daughters might follow. Because these mothers were working for pay, their husbands were unlikely to keep them at home, leaving the girls free to go to school. A creche was provided for younger children, and the school was organized in shifts so that, respecting Indian tradition, girls older than about eight or nine years could be taught separately from the boys. The boys come in the mornings, leaving the girls at home to complete their family chores. After the boys leave at lunchtime, school begins for the girls.

Ms. Saraswati is driven by two personal imperatives: ensuring that not one of her students need be poor in adulthood and ending child labour prevalent among girls in her school community. She proudly showed me an invitation one of her senior girl students recently received to attend a college science program in recognition of winning a major science competition.

## EN BREF

Une enseignante qui travaille dans les bidonvilles de Nouvelle-Delhi a réussi à changer le cours de la vie de centaines d'enfants, dont la plupart n'avaient jamais fréquenté une école. Malgré des obstacles écrasants, les enfants de l'école Katha d'entrepreneuriat font des progrès rapides, et obtiennent souvent de meilleurs résultats que leurs pairs qui fréquentent les écoles d'état. C'est là la preuve qu'avec une détermination passionnée, on peut améliorer les chances de succès des enfants même les plus désavantagés. Les succès obtenus par M<sup>me</sup> Sarawathy nous oblige à nous interroger sur notre incapacité à assurer la réussite scolaire dans le contexte d'une société qui est comparativement beaucoup plus riche.



There was much about the Katha school that was surprising and intriguing, especially in comparison to India's state schools. The school is a tumble of rooms stuck on to the original small building with bright murals painted on the internal walls and 'labs' full of industrious and happy children. The work of children and teachers decorates the walls of the rooms. The children choose what they will do when they come to school - the reading room, the history lab, the computer centre. They choose wisely and form classes that look much like our age-based groupings. The four-year-olds learn English, and the computer lab is always full - "because of globalization," Ms. Saraswati told us. Teenagers often pass the state high school graduation exams after only two or three years of attendance at KSE, despite the fact that they arrive without previous school experience.

Parents pay fees, at least a few rupees a month; KSE is, after all, a private school that relies on charitable donations and grants. But the fees are also an expression of values. This school, like many other initiatives of the non-government sector in India, wants to develop self-reliance in families and communities. "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will feed himself for a lifetime." The women's cooperatives that are emerging

from the school's original income generation projects enable families to pay for what matters - the future of their children.

Katha does not aim to replace regular schools, only to give these urban, slum, excluded children a chance - not an opportunity, but a real chance at a decent standard of living. When the children are ready, they are expected to go to "real" schools. I assumed these to be the state schools. "Oh no," Ms. Saraswati told us, "In state schools they will drop out again. We make arrangements for them to go to public schools (private). The state system is too bureaucratic and can never change enough to teach our children".

This place of joy, hope, optimism, love and serious pursuit of learning exists within the most squalled, depressed and poor neighbourhood that I have ever seen. It left me deeply disturbed. I went to India on a field study of the impact of globalization on the voluntary sector. With a typically western mindset, I expected to learn a lot "about". I was hardly prepared for the challenge of learning "from". Ms. Saraswati and her staff are committed to social justice and democratic and economic participation in society through education. Yet, in our terms, theirs is a private school. The founder has given up on the public system

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because it can't - or won't - change enough.

The success of Ms. Saraswati's students stands in stark contrast to the norm for Indian children in similar circumstances. Astoundingly, though, it also stands in contrast to the experience of many Canadian students.

Canada is not India. Unlike India and most of the developing world, we have achieved universal primary education and almost universal secondary education. And yet, despite commit-

ments of governments and educators alike, our schools have not yet delivered on the promise to improve the life chances of every student. In fact, student success continues to be more closely correlated to economic and social circumstances than to schooling.<sup>3</sup>

I know schools in Canada like KSE, schools where the teachers, with the community, are determined against significant odds that all children will learn. And they do. But what is the future for children and youth whose schools are

not meeting their responsibility to improve the life chances of their students? What about our inner city failures to improve the future for our own underclass? Our pockets of rural poverty where schools seem unable to break the cycle of underachievement? Our Davis Inlets? The challenges we face pale beside those of Ms. Saraswati in New Delhi; and yet we have much to learn from her refusal to fail. Why can Canada, as a nation, not make the same commitment to the children of this immensely wealthy land that Ms. Saraswati makes to her students: that they will not grow up to be under-educated, poor, left behind?

The Dakar Framework for Action sets out frameworks for regions, including Europe and North America, urges countries to develop national action plans, and reminds us that "[t]o ensure sustainable and peaceful development in North American and European countries, renewed emphasis is required on 'learning to live together' in Education for All context".<sup>4</sup> Of course, the very notion of a national strategy for education in Canada is the proverbial Gordian knot. But surely we have the imagination - and the moral imperative - to build a country-wide commitment to shared goals and address our national shortcomings with the same passion that motivates Ms. Saraswati. 🍌

1 Janet K. Museveni, Address to the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education (Halifax, Nova Scotia, November 26, 2000).

2 World Education Forum. The Dakar Framework for Action. Paris, France: UNESCO, 2000), 9.

3 Douglas J. Willms, and Elizabeth A. Sloat, *Literacy for Life*. Policy Brief No. 4. (Atlantic Centre for Policy Research, University of New Brunswick, December 1998). <http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pubs.html#pbrief>

4 Dakar Framework, 65

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