

Seeding Social Innovation in Private Schools: A Case Study of St. Mary's School, Delhi, India

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Abstract: Education has an important role in creating new learning opportunities and driving social progress. As social institutions, schools form a fundamental block to understand about life and society. While schools have done a good job in preparing students for life and society, newer challenges facing humanity have now emerged. How can schools meaningfully engage students on various pressing social issues and empower their students to take action on issues like environmental crisis, social injustice and developmental challenges? Current school curriculum does not provide adequate opportunities where students can experiment and explore these issues and look for solutions. Problem identifications and their solutions can be explored by creating an interface between community and school. This would create an open space for creativity and innovation amongst students to explore, develop and understand social issues. Such practices would further fuel the students to think and act to address social and environmental challenges. Such approach will pave the way for students to implement and share innovative solutions rather than simply limiting their knowledge to the classroom. This paper is an attempt to highlight the initiatives taken by St. Mary's School (Delhi, India) under its social footprint projects and social innovation in the context of community engagement and emerging environmental issues.

Keywords: education, environment, innovation, school, society.

1. Introduction

Creativity and innovation go hand in hand. Creativity is the ability to generate novel and useful ideas, and is the seed of innovation. But unless it is applied and scaled, it is still just an idea. Innovation is execution of an idea which addresses a specific challenge and achieves value

for both society and people. Innovation has its roots in almost every aspect of human life. Today, the world is running on a more technologically advanced track. We are focusing more on identification of solutions to specific problems of our daily lives. Since human life is centered in the social context where he/she resides, most of our issues, challenges and problems are social. All these problems are in the form of a web and seeking their solutions is more like connecting the dots in order to reach to the root cause of specific problems. Such an interwoven and dynamic relation between problems and their solutions calls for innovation with more societal and humane angles - "Social Innovation". Social innovations are new ideas, concept and strategies that meet the social needs of different elements which range from working conditions and education to community development and health - they extend and strengthen society.

2. Social Innovation

Young (2011) defined social innovation as "a novel mechanism that increases the welfare of the individuals who adopt it compared with the status quo" (p. 2185). Social innovation incorporates both idea generation and socially sustainable outcome (Phills et al., 2008). Innovative programmes are "a new or different way to address a societal problem or pursue a charitable mission that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than prevailing approaches" (Salamon et al., 2010).

Social innovations resulting from community-based collaborations are very effective because they build on the strengths of the community by partnering with residents and clients; the latter are closest to the social problem and understand the nuances that professionals often cannot (Mulroy and Shay, 1997). This notion is a unique social work perspective that the profession brings to social innovation literature and practice. Involving clients in all stages of development and delivery of a new idea does not

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only strengthen the social innovation but also create sustainability for the implementation of the idea (Nandan et al., 2013). Involving members of marginalized communities in designing and developing new ideas can help build their capacities (Sakarya et al., 2012). User-driven innovation, in which end users of products and services are given a voice in solution development is far more sustainable than innovations generated by an entrepreneur alone. This approach upholds social work principles of client self-determination and empowering environments (Mulroy and Shay, 1997; Tedmanson and Guerin, 2011).

3. Driving Social Innovation in School

There has been an increase in the number of initiatives taken by schools in India where students have played a vital role and have come forward with solution to social problems. Some examples are the *Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana* (KVPY), which is an ongoing National Fellowship Programme in basic sciences, initiated and funded by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. The National Science Talent Search Scheme (NSTSS) conducted by NCERT is another such example. The IGNITE competition held by National Innovation Foundation, India is yet another platform that is giving students a place to experiment and innovate, and come up with ideas which are extraordinary. There is thus a need for linking school education to address social challenges at the grassroots level. With changing global paradigm, the domain of education is also going through rapid changes and experimentation.

Due to globalisation, and the highly integrated world environment where competition is ever increasing, the emphasis in schools is greater on producing labour force as per the market needs. Technological advancements have fastened growth, production and information sharing. In the social context, globalization is resulting in changing dynamics of relationships, both at societal and environmental level. All these aspect are shaping and bending the flow of education system across the globe. Education is considered as the central driving force in creating threshold which could drive the life up to an expected level. Bridging education with creativity and innovations would further strengthen the learning and will help in attaining sustainable development. For large scale education systems such as ours, catering to a vast population with relatively limited resources is a major challenge. At the same time, with rapid advances in new technologies, changing needs of the economy and the very presence of the challenges identified above, the sector itself presents a fertile ground for pioneering innovations (National Innovation Council, 2010).

4. Innovative Practices at St. Mary's School

St. Mary's School, under its social initiatives and field action programmes, has initiated considerable activities and innovation projects. The projects are being monitored by the School's Social Work Wing. In order to foster innovation and creativity, greater emphasis is being given on problem and project-based learning. Through its various innovation projects and hands-on learning strategies, the Social Work Wing of the School is making intervention in the nearby adopted communities. The School Community Model, which emphasizes on exchange and shared relationship between school and nearby communities, has evolved itself as a dynamic practice.

To harness the creative potential of its students from different disciplines, the School has set up a Social Citizen Empowerment Division which invites entries from all classes. The Social Work Club provides opportunities to students to explore and learn beyond the classroom. The idea is to give a space for participatory learning and developing critical understanding on social issues. The Club executes projects on social and environmental issues. The School has also initiated programmes for making students come forward with innovative solutions to the specific problems which they are interested to work on. This opportunity is helping them to link their classroom learning to relevant real-life experience at the grassroots level. The focus is on the work and intervention in context of the issues and challenges in the nearby communities and to undertake innovative experiments, projects and problem solving exercises. The idea has been to expand in the field of entrepreneurship and social innovation. To promote the same, the School has started a project under which students are encouraged to come with innovative ideas which could be scaled up later for business and Social Responsibility Projects of the School. This objective of the project is to promote and encourage social cause and intervention. Students are encouraged to work in teams and devise their own methods to address specific challenges. One such project that has been undertaken by the students of the School is the Urban Farming Community Outreach Project.

5. Projects Undertaken at St. Mary's School

Project 1: Promotion of Urban Farming (Fig. 1).

Goal 2 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture." The Goal expands to state that by 2030, the agricultural



Figure 1. A pilot urban farming experiment in *Mohammadpur* Community in Delhi, India.

productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers should be doubled, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment (UN, 2015).

In keeping this Goal as an objective, the students of the Citizen Empowerment Division at St. Mary's School have developed a project for promoting urban farming in *Mohammadpur* and Humayunpur communities in Delhi, India. Due to urbanization, cities are carrying population beyond their threshold capacity. This is best exemplified in Delhi, which is one of the metropolitan cities in India. There is need to emphasize the concept of greening of available terraces and tiny vacant places to cater to the ecological and sociological needs of urban population. Urban farming is thus an emerging trend and also comes with other social, economic and psychological benefits (Maheshwari, 2017). It is estimated that an area of 40-50 sq.m. of terrace would be sufficient to meet the requirement of a family of four persons for 12 months. The objective of the project is to promote learning by

doing and creating awareness among students and locals on health and environmental issues. Through field engagement, students are working in direct contact with the community. By practicing urban farming the community is now able to utilize open spaces, and produce fresh vegetable and nutritious food for themselves.

Project 2: Create Your Own Business.

Globalization and highly integrated world environment, where competition is at its peak, emphasizes on producing labour force as per the market needs. The growing economy and changing lifestyle has created a job seeking culture. Be it professional or technical courses, all courses aim at adding human resource to work for others. In this race for attainment of social and economic status, most individuals today have lost passion and interests. Students are trained and equipped as per the need and requirement of the corporate houses. There is thus a need to have an intervention at the School level, such that students can learn to use their skills and interests to create a business enterprise, either for profit or for social and environmental issues. For addressing this concern, the St. Mary's School has introduced a "Create Your Own Business" project as

a part of the summer assignment for students in Junior and Middle School. The project focuses on entrepreneurship and innovation, and students are given opportunity to brainstorm with their business ideas. Once the idea is formulated and the proposal ready, students are given a platform to pitch their ideas and incubation is provided to the selected ideas, which are selected as startups.

Some of the proposed ideas include making greeting cards from waste papers, theme based photography, eco-friendly gifts and setting up of gift wrapping service, jewellery designing, developing mobile based applications, etc. Selected students have been taught required lessons in the direction of capital resource management as well as organisational skills for planning, product design market research. These initiatives are not only shaping their skills towards building a business for themselves, but they are also applying these skills in their personal lives as well. The provisions of innovation spaces in schools can play an important role in fostering creativity and inspiring innovation in young students. The enjoyment factor involved in this type of engagement is enhancing and motivating young minds thereby opening the doors for flow and creativity.

6. Discussion

Changing approaches to education in the present context are more inclusive and integrated as compared in the past. In the past, learning mainly revolved around schools. Today, a student learns from the information environment to which he/she comes in contact on day to day basis. The learning mode has shifted from instructive to interactive and collaborative, focusing more on learning by doing and discovering. Assessment during the learning process is helping the child to improve his/her skills as well as non-cognitive skills.

St. Mary's School has incorporated modification in curriculums and assessments and has successfully created a space for student to innovate and learn. The practices and approaches adopted by the School are working to promote innovation at grassroots level by project-based learning. In this approach, students are designing, planning and carrying out extended projects that are

producing a publicly-exhibited output such as a product, a model or a method to bring about changes. While going through such learning approaches, students are developing inquiry-based learning as well as problem-based learning.

7. Conclusion

Developing of an open and extensive learning system within the school framework is the need of the hour. This will help empower students to develop, implement and share innovative solutions. This will also play a critical role in the enlargement of the scope of inculcating social work spirit at the school level and in seeding innovation in children.

8. References

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