

Educating the Dropouts

○ Sr. Marie Coutinho

JEEVAN Nirwaha Niketan (JNN), is a school with a difference in Mumbai's Andheri (West), where we have some five hundred kids from workers' colonies — street children, orphans, and dropouts. These boys and girls come from the neighbouring slums. Our director is Mr. Noel D'Silva, a man with charisma, who has a gift for reaching out to the most marginalised of society. There are about 26 staff members.

I was teaching a Value Education class for 13, 14, and 15 year old children. In order to help them appreciate themselves, I asked them the following questions:

- What do your parents think of you?
- What do your teachers think of you?
- What do your friends think of you?
- What do you think of yourself?

Of the many responses, most were negative. Ajay, the naughtiest boy in the school, had nothing to say. He looked startled, and very upset. After the class, I took Ajay for a walk and we chatted for a while. Then I asked him why he had been so cold and silent. After a few moments he slowly began to unwind.

To the first query, he said, "My father says he wishes I hadn't been born. He also thinks I'm good for nothing and can only bring shame to the family."

To the second he responded, "Some of my teachers say I'm useless and have nothing in my head."

His reply to the third question — "My friends call me a cheat, a robber, a mischief monger."

As he answered these questions, I imagined the picture he was building in his mind of himself and asked, "Ajay, what do you think of yourself?"

Seeing the piercing look in my eyes, his voice filled with pain and anger, he said, "I hate myself."

Today, Ajay is 18 and still battles with what life has to offer him. He smokes, sometimes drinks, is prone to taking drugs, but is not altogether lost. Ajay knows that he

has a home in JNN with people who care for, love, and accept him.

The system of education offered at JNN is different than that in a mainstream school. We follow the Level System — which was the brain child of Mr. Josantony. The system is based on the understanding that everybody is good in some subjects and weak in others. In the usual school system, if the child fails in one or more subjects, then he or she would have to be left behind in class. In the Level System the child instead goes to a higher level in those subjects in which he or she performed well, remaining in the same level in those subjects in which he or she is weak. For example, the child can be in Level



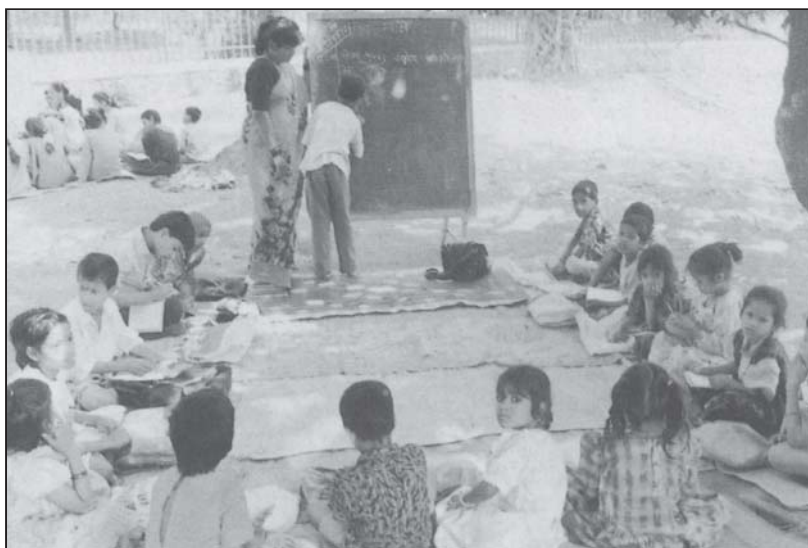
III in Hindi, Level IV in Mathematics and Level II in Environmental Studies. She/he may be with younger children in one subject, older children in another subject, and with children who are of the same age in a third subject. This system has its own advantages and disadvantages.

JNN, overall, does not expect any less than what is expected of children in the usual school system. The main difference is that each subject is monitored and evaluated separately. Failure in reaching the required level in one area will not stop the child from advancing even up to SSC in another subject.

As far as the SSC goes, the National Open School, Delhi Board, allows the child to sit for one or more subjects at a time. As soon as a child is 15 years of age, she/he can sit for the SSC in those subjects in which she/he has reached a sufficient level of preparedness. When a JNN student reaches the required level in the other subjects, she/he can also sit for those subjects for the SSC. It is, therefore, up to each student to work hard to reach the required standard for as many out of the five subjects as possible.

We have eight levels before the SSC. The syllabus is child-oriented and at the same time, geared towards the requirements of the National Open School, Delhi Board. The child is encouraged and challenged to move up and make the grade with constant effort. We educate kids in an atmosphere of trust and mutual learning, and promote questioning rather than rote learning. We do this with a view to building the students' self-esteem, and preparing them for life.

Part of our system offers vocational training in such fields as typewriting, tailoring, carpentry, cosmetics, hair dressing, gardening,



cooking, and embroidery. We hope to be able to offer students not only specific vocational skills but training in related aspects of self-employment, including the procurement of raw materials, accounting, price setting, and marketing.

However, it is not always smooth sailing at JNN. It's not easy to find committed teachers who hold values like selflessness, hard work and sacrifice. In addition, most of the kids are undernourished. Their ability to concentrate is poor, their effort is not consistent and their aspirations are low. To instil hope, encourage an ethic of hard work, and challenge them to strive for improvement is not an easy task.

Discipline is something we have to struggle hard to achieve. The teacher has to be creative, sensitive and deeply humane to cater to the needs of students. She/he has to be a person who inspires by deeds and not just by words. The kids see through anything less.

Too many overworked mothers and drunken fathers have little or no time for their children. Many of the children are abused both physically and psychologically. For them life at home is ex-

ceedingly hard. To compensate, we at JNN have to do our best to be consistently loving, understanding, supportive and extremely gentle. This is not always easy. We not only have to recognise these problems but also cope through patience, courage and determination.

Imparting knowledge is our main concern, but for us the knowledge and skills should be useful in helping children come to grips with life and rise above their difficult situations in order to provide for themselves a better life. Our most essential task is to help them discover their humanity and to enable them to realise that they have a right to a more decent existence.

These children do not want to be pitied. They want to be persons with dignity and self-confidence. If I can help them do that, then I have fulfilled my role as an educator in a society where most of the educational system does not do its job, but instead has been turned into a corrupt moneymaking machine. □

The author was a lecturer in Mithibhai College, Mumbai, before joining the Missionary of Christ Jesus.