

1-1-2006

Project Priyadarshini: Empowering Students and Teachers to be Agents of Social Change

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EDU-COM 2006 International Conference. Engagement and Empowerment: New Opportunities for Growth in Higher Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth Western Australia, 22-24 November 2006.

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Padmanabhan, V. University of Mumbai, India. Project Priyadarshini: Empowering Students and Teachers to be Agents of Social Change

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities were regarded as “Ivory Towers” kept aloof from the society and its life. But gradually it is being realised that teachers of higher education cannot do justice to their roles and responsibilities if they do not contribute their might to the realization of national goals, fulfilment of their social commitments and be the agents of social change.

In our B Ed College, the students are provided opportunities to work with the community in collaboration with NGOs. In addition to this, last year, a concentrated effort was made to empower both the teachers and the student teachers by enabling them to work with differently abled students through the Project Priyadarshini. Priyadarshini means one with pleasant appearance. We, at K. J. Somaiya College of Education, had the privilege of kindling the spark in the young minds of many visually impaired college going girls by training them in etiquette, communication skills, self managing skills and life skills, thus inculcating in them a winning attitude. The college also acquainted them with role models in order to raise their levels of aspiration and set for themselves higher goals.

The project truly saw the transformation of the young participants into a more confident, determined to successfully combat the challenges of life. The project also left both the teachers and the students more enlightened and more confident about playing their role as agents of social change by making us understand the complex realities that lie behind the word ‘differently abled’.

This paper is an attempt to share our unique experiences about student staff partnership towards leadership and empowerment in order to play effectively our role as agents of social change.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of development is the complete fulfilment of man, in all the richness of personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments-as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer. - Edgar Faure et al (1972).

Among the four pillars of education - learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together / learning to live with others and learning to be, learning to live together / learning to live with others assumes more significance in the present context: The twenty-first century is faced with the challenge of rebuilding human communities. In this new age, with its new social demands, learning the art of living together will be seen as the means of healing the many wounds inflicted by the hatred and tolerance that have prevailed throughout so much of the twenty first century. (UNESCO:1996). This human aspect of education has been the focus in India as reflected in the educational philosophy of great thinkers:

Real Education consists in drawing the best out of oneself. What better book can there be than the book of humanity- M.K. Gandhi.

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.--Rabindra Nath Tagore

In 1947, addressing the graduates of the Allahabad University, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said, "A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race toward higher objectives..."

In the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century in Paris (5-9 October 1998), Murli Manohar Joshi, Minister, Human Resource Development and Science and Technology said in his Country Paper on Higher Education in India- Vision and Action:

India realizes, like other nations of the world, that humanity stands today at the head of a new age of a large synthesis of knowledge, and that the East and the West have to collaborate in bringing about concerted action for universal upliftment, and lasting peace and unity. The university is required to be seen not only as a seat of learning and new knowledge through its research and extension functions but also as a focal point for the dissemination of information to the community through continuing education, extension education and through field outreach activities. It will have a major role to play in directly impacting on the community for social development and change. It should be facilitated in this task which is described by the UGC (University Grants Commission) as the third dimension of education.

I hereby present a brief history of the extension dimension of higher education in India in general, followed by the role of community work as practiced in teacher education in Mumbai. Then I shall delve on the mission of my institution, K J Somaiya Comprehensive College of Education, Training and Research, Mumbai, India and the activities that are being pursued to realize our mission. In the end, I wish to share with you our focused attempt to empower teachers and students to be the agents of social change - Project Priyadarshini.

A SYNOPTIC VIEW TO THE HISTORY OF THE EXTENSION DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

The introduction and establishment of Extension as the Third Dimension of the University system equal in importance to teaching and research is a task that has been arduously pursued at the University of Mumbai. It was in 1960 that the Kothari Commission first articulated the concept of Extension and the TRINITY of Teaching, Research and Extension. The Commission stated that Extension was essential for

- making education relevant to real life situations
- for preventing the alienation of the educand from society
- for developing in the educand a sense of responsibility towards society
- for deepening the teacher's knowledge through a wider exposure to real life situations.

While linking Education to National Development, the Education Commission (1966) added in its report the following to the objectives of higher education:

- To foster in the teachers and students and through them in the society generally, the attitudes and values needed for developing the 'good life' in individuals and society, to bring the universities closer to the community through extension of knowledge and its applications for problem-solving.

The opportunity to introduce the Extension Dimension in universities was taken when the National Adult Education Program (NAEP) was announced by the Government of India in 1977. In adopting the NAEP, the UGC indirectly laid the basis for lifelong learning and continuing education in the university system.

The first guidelines for Adult and Continuing Education and Extension were formulated by UGC in 1982. Three strategies for integrating extension into the curriculum were given in the form of training to develop skills or expertise among teachers, developing units on extension for integration into the curriculum and field work by students to be considered as a learning / academic exercise (and not as only some social service).

Till 1983 the field outreach programs continued to be limited to literacy, post-literacy and continuing education. In 1986 at the time of the formulation of New Policy for Education, a Review Committee was appointed by UGC under the Chairmanship of Prof. Ramlal Parikh to review the ongoing Adult Education programs in universities for their greater and more effective participation for fulfilling the aims and goals of the Government of India with respect to Adult Education. The recommendations of this Committee, as will be seen, were a landmark in institutionalizing the extension dimension. The Committee's main recommendations regarding extension as the third dimension were: Adult and Continuing Education should not be an ad hoc program but it should be institutionalized by making it a permanent integral part of the university system. Extension should be the third major activity of universities along with teaching and research receiving equal importance as them. At least 25% of the curricular time is allocated for Extension Work with the award of an academic credit for it. The goal of extension Work would be to sensitize the students and teachers for encouraging their moral and ethical growth and for facilitating attitudinal change.

Literacy was a priority over extension during 1990 -1995. In July 1997, UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg which spoke about Adult Learning and Lifelong Learning in its Declaration and Agenda for the Future. Thus, lifelong learning took predominance over adult education, continuing education, population education and any type of learning outside the formal system. The UGC now revised its old guidelines and the new guidelines for Adult and Continuing Extension and Field Outreach were published in 1997.

The major thrusts were to be to:

- work towards the acceptance of philosophy of continuing education, extension and field outreach programs;
- try to achieve closer integration between formal and non-formal education;
- reach out to a larger section of adults particularly of the deprived groups;
- make educational content relevant to learners through curriculum reform through the experience gained in interaction with the community;
- enrich the learning process of the students and faculty through exposure to the socio-cultural realities.

Responding to the emerging needs of globalization and privatization, the UGC stated:

- The University has a crucial role to play in promoting social change. It must make an impact on the community if it is to retain its legitimacy and gain public support. It seeks to do so by a new emphasis on community based programs and work on social issues.

PRESENT STATUS OF EXTENSION WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At present, extension is an integral part of all the disciplines in higher education. The Department of Adult and Continuing Education and Extension has been established in each and every university. Extension is now considered as a two way process in the form of intellectual intervention in solving community's problems thereby making class room learning more life oriented. Each student gets 10 marks in lieu of 120 hours put in by him/her during the academic year. However, the institutions can opt out of community work if they feel like doing so.

AGAINST THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND – EFFORTS OF K. J. SOMAIYA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION TOWARDS COMMUNITY BASED EMPOWERMENT

As a teacher education institution, our mission is to develop in the students the skills and competencies necessary to play the multifaceted role of the teacher in the new millennium; enable the students to live in harmony with oneself and with the others in the profession, community and society at large; to instil a spirit of fellowship among students, to prepare them to be global citizens through cooperation and peaceful co existence.

In order to realize our goal of life long learning, the institution has volunteered to be the centre for the national and state open universities: the centre offers 62 courses from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and 3 courses from Yashwant Rao Chauhan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) thus facilitating the life long education of thousands of people staying in Mumbai.

The objectives of the institution for extension activities are to work towards an integration of the philosophy of continuing education, extension and field out reach programs in the B. Ed. Curriculum, to achieve a closer integration between formal and non-formal education, to reach out to a larger section of deprived groups, to make the classroom transaction techniques/methods relevant based on the experiences gained in interaction with the community, to enrich the learning process of the students and faculty through exposure to the socio cultural realities.

TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF OUR OBJECTIVES

The efforts of the institution in community based activities will be discussed under the following two heads: Community Work and Extension Projects with the University. Over the years, Community Work has been undertaken in the following areas:

- remedial teaching for school children,
- orientation of school teachers to innovative techniques of teaching,
- intensive coaching and pre examination guidance and counselling for tenth standard students in tribal areas,
- creating awareness about AIDS in the community,
- providing voluntary services to the institutions for old people and persons with disabilities.

Apart from this, our students have worked on various Extension Projects offered by the Department of Adult and Continuing Education and Extension, University of Mumbai. Last year the college had taken up the following extension projects:

Population Education Club:

- Under this project the students of the college were sensitized to various social issues. In turn, these students sensitized the secondary school population to social issues such as status of women, banking procedures, environmental protection, etc. Other community level activities were arranging career talks, conducting seminars and workshops on various social issues and organizing street plays, poster, essay and slogan competitions on various social issues.

Career Project:

- The students had collected information on various non conventional careers with special focus on careers for women. This information was compiled and disseminated in various practice teaching schools.

Information Technology Project:

- In order to sensitize students to various social issues and develop their computer skills the students downloaded information from ten websites and wrote critical reviews of these articles.

Each of our students contributes at least 150 hours of work towards community work every year.

In order to train the students and teachers for the above, the following efforts were made by the institution:

- induction program for each activity with the help of NGOs and experts from the community
- selection of teachers and student managers to co ordinate between the Department of Adult Education, the community and the institution,
- organization of guest lectures by resource persons on various social issues to sensitize the teachers and students and to motivate them to put in their best,
- adopting a systemic approach to the management of the community work through efficient planning and constant feedback.

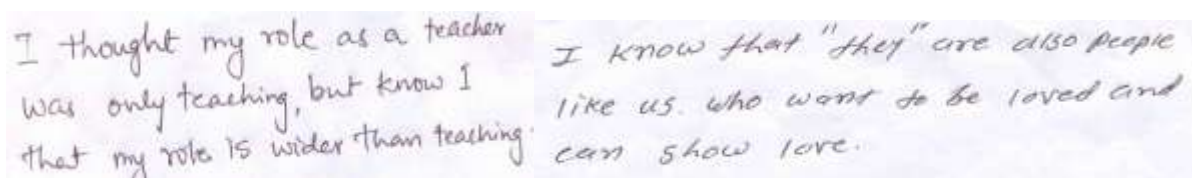
IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The next section of this paper dwells on a brief discussion of how the author feels about the extent of achievement of the above objectives by the institution. For the sake of convenience, each objective is restated below.

- to work towards an integration of the philosophy of continuing education, extension and field out reach programs in the B. Ed. Curriculum

In order to incorporate the philosophy of continuing education and field out reach, the institution has made efforts to intricately weave this into the entire fabric of the teacher education curriculum by ensuring that every activity of the institution gives the students an exposure to the system of education that is wider than the formal system of education which orients them to the challenges and techniques of reaching out to the marginalized sections of society.

The action research topics were centred on the theme of inclusive education, the community work activities helped them to associate closely with the different sections of society. The tangible outcomes of this is evident in the learning outcomes expressed by the students. A few glimpses of these are seen in the excerpts of the gains as experienced by the students:

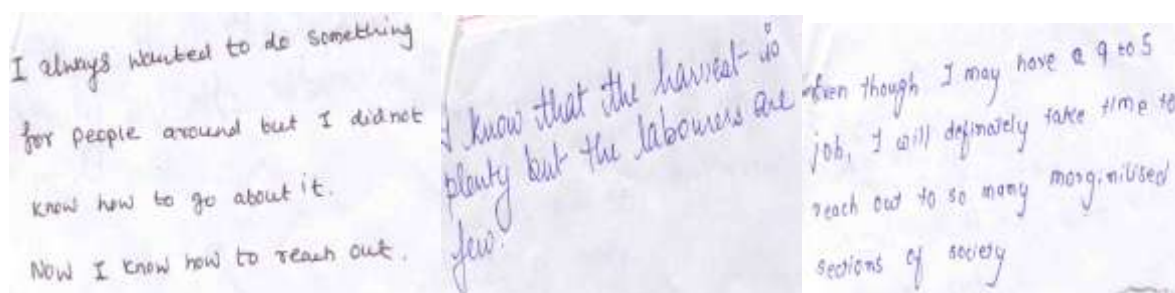


I thought my role as a teacher was only teaching, but now I know that my role is wider than teaching.

I know that "they" are also people like us who want to be loved and can show love.

to achieve a closer integration between formal and non-formal education.

While the formal system of education serves principally to meet the common needs of the student population, leaving the underachievers, the differently abled and the marginalized sections of the society to the non formal system of education. The challenge for us lies in enabling the teacher trainees to be familiarized with this entire system of non formal education which goes on parallel and yet with little or no collaboration. In an attempt to see that our student teachers are prepared for their new roles in inclusive set ups, where they will be required to work in collaboration with teachers of special schools, the college had made attempts to let the teacher trainees work in institutions like the National Open School, the Spastics Society and the David Sassoon Industrial School. Through this the students were not only exposed to the different teaching methods of reaching out to the students who are differently abled, but also became aware of the alternative forms of the educational system that is possible.



I always wanted to do something for people around but I did not know how to go about it. Now I know how to reach out.

I know that the harvest is plenty but the labourers are few.

Even though I may have a 9 to 5 job, I will definitely take time to reach out to so many marginalised sections of society.

to reach out to a larger section of deprived groups

For the teachers to play a significant role in the emancipation of the society, it would begin with an interaction with deprived sections of the society and an awareness of the constraints that they experience in day to day life. With this objective, the students worked with the rag pickers in collaboration with the Stree Mukti Sanghatana (A women's organization that works for the emancipation of women), the AIDS patients of K J Somaiya Hospital and the street children in collaboration with Pratham and the tribal school teachers in Mumbai.

A sense of social obligation and removal of the various apprehensions of the students were achieved through these interactions.

As we interacted more and move with the children I realised that they yearned for love, Sweet- Words Compassion and time. With each progressing week I become more patient & Caring. Their thirst for knowledge & hunger for love by us to a Certain extent.

Teaching a boy called Lakman studying in 5th std was really interesting as he look deep interest while he used to do his homework. The boy who was studying in Municipal school, whose family background also was not stable, and whose environment also was not conducive to learning; was quite well versed in English, and it appeared as through he was studying in an English medium school, though it was not. The experience of teaching such kid, made me feel that I should also take enough pains in helping him to also still better, in all subjects related to his standard. It made me feel that even under unusual and difficult — circumstances such small kid studies so well; why not me, with all facilities of life.

To make the classroom transaction techniques/methods relevant by relating them to the experiences gained by interaction with the community.

The true spirit of extension lies in the two way exchange of the knowledge, skills and resources between the educational institutions and the community. The extension work proved to enrich the experiences of the students leading to the modification of the techniques of curriculum transaction according to the needs. This is evident from the kind of learning experiences that were reported by the students:

'It was through my close interaction with Kabir (student with Cerebral Palsy) that I realized that learning, what we take for granted, but is a complex process and each one of us have different problems in processing information. I too in my teaching should be so aware of how learning takes place. I should adopt different teaching techniques to reach students with different abilities.'

'I learnt the skills and confidence of adopting interactive teaching strategies in teaching which I will use in my regular classroom teaching.'

'After a long struggle of reaching out to the students at Sulabha School for the Mentally Challenged, I feel that Love and perseverance on the part of the teachers is all that students need.'

All these responses are an indication of the basic awareness and a feeling of empowerment by the students in their close interaction with different kinds of students. It was also seen and realized by the institution that these transforming experiences would not be possible without a collaborative effort of different community based organizations.

PROJECT PRIYADARSHINI: A FOCUSED ATTEMPT TO EMPOWER TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Last year, a concentrated effort was made to empower both the teachers and the students by enabling them to work with differently abled students through the Project Priyadarshini. Priyadarshini means a woman who has pleasant appearance. We, at K. J. Somaiya College of Education, had the privilege of kindling the spark in the young minds of many visually impaired college going girls by training them in etiquette, communication skills, self managing skills and life skills, thus inculcating in them a winning attitude. We also acquainted them with role models in order to raise their levels of aspiration and set for themselves higher goals.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT:

- to develop faith in the minds of visually impaired girls in various possibilities of transforming their lives:
 1. create awareness about need to
 2. develop positive attitude towards life,
 3. inculcate values necessary for good social living,
- to be in peace with oneself,
- to develop self managing skills,
- to develop life skills/ health and hygiene,
- to get acquainted with behavioral patterns needed in different life situations.,
- to develop basic communication skills in English.
- to acquaint the visually impaired girls with the role models who have overcome similar handicaps and made their marks in life.

Sample: This project targeted college going girls in the age group of 16-25 years pursuing higher education in various colleges of Mumbai. A survey of the colleges in Mumbai helped us to identify about twenty two visually challenged girls for the training.

METHODOLOGY:

PLANNING:

Our very own professor Dr. Kalpana R. Kharade, who was fortunate enough to have vision in her childhood and adolescence, but whose eye sight faded gradually, could empathize with such students. She designed the training module and trained a set of fifteen students of our institution for the project.

Several role models, who themselves were visually challenged, but had overcome the handicap and made a mark in their respective fields were identified and invited to be the resource persons for the project.

Letters were written to the Principals of the colleges to send the identified visually challenged girls to the institution for the training which received an overwhelming support not only from them but also from the parents of the girls. Infact, some such girls, who were not studying in any college, volunteered to participate in the training program after hearing about it from their friends.

The program was scheduled for ten days during the winter break. The design of the training module is given below:

Orientation in good manners and etiquette, communication skills, desirable attitudes, values
Modes of presentation –lectures, demonstrations, role play and discussions

Topics for the session –

- Welcome to the world of possibilities to transform your life
- Let us think differently about our career
- Priyadarshini exemplifies good qualities (Self confidence, Virtues of accountability, forgiveness, trustworthiness and politeness)
- Priyadarshini learns self-managing skills (Peace, stress management time management etc.)
- Priyadarshini communicates well (Introducing oneself, Conversation tips, Art of listening, Basics of communicating, Body language, Giving negative feedback in a positive way, Disagree without being disagreeing etc.)
- Priyadarshini at the workplace (as a model of consistency, compassion and civility, relation with colleagues and authority, telephone etiquettes)
- Priyadarshini learns life skills. (Taking care of one's health, self maintenance, sense of how to wear and what to wear, some make- up tips etc.)
- Priyadarshini at the restaurant (etiquette of dining at hotels, at the public places)
- Priyadarshini at different life circles (celebration of different occasion's of life birthdays, anniversary, other occasions like condolences)
- Priyadarshini always does right things (How to say yes and no at right time, mechanics of apology etc.)
- Priyadarshini is confident!: 'Yes! I will win!'

Topics for English communication

Meeting with Role models.

EXECUTION:

The first session 'Welcome to the World of Possibilities to Transform Your Life' was presented by our very own professor Dr. Kalpana R. Kharade, who is also visually challenged, a qualified speaker who is a class apart by her own calibre and genre. In her enlightening session, she emphasized the importance of positive attitude in life and also gave the formula to bring about such attitudinal changes.

The program lasted for ten days. Each day comprised of prayer, inspirational stories and reviews of inspirational books by B. Ed students, sessions on communication/life skills, and interaction with role models (who were also visually impaired) in order to help students set up a higher level of aspiration and to motivate them to scale greater heights.

The prayer, "Sarve Janah Sukhino Bhavanthu.." in Sanskrit, sought the blessings of the Almighty for the health, peace and prosperity of all the people on the earth.

Book reviews were done by B Ed students for the benefit of the participants. The reviewed books were 'Seven Habits of Most Successful People' by Stephen Covey, 'Who Moved My Cheese?' by Dr. Spencer Johnson and 'The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari' by Robin Sharma. 'In search of Your True self' by Walter Dill Scott and 'Wings of Fire' by Dr. Abdul Kalam.

These books highlighted the need to accept and adapt to change, goal setting, physical and mental freshness, introspection for analysing oneself which are key to lead a healthy and successful individual and social life.

Sessions on communication skills and life skills included interactive sessions on topics such as 'At the Office', 'Shopping', 'Current Events', Fashion, 'My Role Model', 'Games & Sports', 'My Hobbies', 'Recent Movies I Saw' 'At the Restaurant', 'Myself and My Family', 'Shopping at the Office', 'Games Sports and My Office', 'My Aspirations' and 'What do I value in life' and so on and the participants were encouraged to interact by expressing their opinions on them. To encourage communication in English, there was a film review session where the professors, and the B. Ed

students spoke about a film which they enjoyed watching. All the girls enthusiastically participated in it.

The sessions encouraged the participants to communicate in English and also gave them tips for effective communication. These were conducted by our students under the guidance of faculty members. The participants were also told the importance of acknowledgment and apology in our interactions with people and were taught the art of expressing them through dialogues. There was a session on 'Important Aspects of Interview' about the finest details to be followed while preparing for the interview, during the interview and after the interview. This was later very effectively demonstrated through a mock interview.

There were theory and practical sessions on various skills like dressing up using accessories, hair care and hair style, self grooming, dining etiquettes which were very artistically taught to the participants by our B. Ed students. With a view to aid these young girls to become strong nation builders, empowered to meet the challenges of today's fast changing world, Mr. Harish Chandra Gupta, a Chartered Accountant with his own firm in Mumbai, enriched the knowledge of the participants regarding the different careers available for them and boosted high their morale. Interaction with the Role Models: 'From little acorns grow mighty oaks'. This very aptly sums up the many enlightening role models – a major highlight of the project. In spite of themselves being visually impaired, their achievements spoke of their perseverance and courage, coupled with pioneering spirit and steely determination to achieve success in life by breaking all shackles.

An eminent role model Mr. Suhas Karnik, Asst. Manager, Bank of India, jointly assisted Mr. Gupta in acquainting the participants with the various upcoming professions.

Another eminent role model, Mr. K. Ramakrishnan, General Manager, IDBI, who shared the bitter sweet experiences of his life and inspired the participants with his enthusiasm and advised the them to have positive attitude towards life.

Ms. Tejaswini Godbole, a faculty of K. J. Somaiya Engineering College whose courage and determination to achieve success in life by overcoming her visual handicap is a fine exposition of her achievements. In her powerful and interactive session, she emphasized the importance of having positive attitude in life and to be independent in one's endeavor.

Ms. Kanchan Pamnani, a qualified, well recognized lawyer, encouraged the participants to perceive their goal, do their best to achieve it and emerge as successful, independent and powerful youth of tomorrow.

Ms. Parimala Bhatt, Asst. Manager, Medical Dept. Air India, who is the brainchild behind Snehakit Helpline which she started in 2001 also has many awards to her credit. She very rightly emphasized that one should be motivated from within in order to succeed in life.

The last day saw three prominent role models – Ms. Nafisa Bohariwala, Senior Manager, Central Bank of India, Ms. Vishaka More, Manager, SEBI, and Mr. Nagraj More, Deputy Manager, Bharat Petroleum - all National Award Winners and each of whom had proved their mettle in their respective fields. They emphasized on qualities like humbleness, patience, determination to face challenges, constant drive to climb the ladder of success, good communication skills.

The last day also gave an opportunity to the participants to bring to the fore their latent talents through the cultural program that was specially organized for them. The participants put up mono acting, singing and dancing shows. A duo dancing to the tune of a film son with perfect synchronization of movements made it hard to believe that they were visually challenged and bombarded the myth that it is difficult to 'teach' such girls.

'The Priyadarshini sessions were very useful as they imparted lot of information on different aspects of our life. Meeting with the role models was a pleasant surprise. I have gained immense knowledge on different careers thrown open to us. And Yes! Now I can confidently say that one day I will definitely come as a role model for many visually impaired like me.'

'All that I want to say about the project is that it was a class apart in its own way. It was the real source of inspiration for me. I will utilize all that I have learnt through this project in all my future ventures.'

'The role models were very inspiring. I have gained immense confidence. And most important of all, I can now perceive my goal clearly.'

'Through this project the benefits that I have derived are more confidence, improved communication skills and many positive values which I will incorporate in my life'.

5) Aspiration level:-> In the beginning when we talked to them and asked them what you want to become each one had different things to tell us but at the same time they also told us that these were their unfulfilled as they can not fulfill them but at the end of the program each one said that they will try their best to achieve their dreams.

Initially the participants were shy, resilient, hesitating to talk to voice out their problem & opinions but as the programme progressed they shed all their inhibitions. Right from the beginning, the girls were very helpful. They help each other in all aspect later on they become good friends of each other & also with the trainee teacher.

The usually depressed girls through they were ambitious, aspiring to reach new heights. Still had their own doubts as to how to make the impossible into possible. But the sessions which were convened by eminent speakers gave them so much inspiration and courage to pursue their dreams that even if they were let go at that moment it would have been impossible to stop them. Even in the case of trainee teacher, the case was very much similar. Through the programme, the trainee teacher got an excellent opportunity to develop leadership skill improve their personality learn many things from the usually challenged girls.

The entire project was a grand success. The six days truly saw the transformation of the young participants into a more confident, determined and refreshingly modern 'Priyadarshinis' armed with a clear vision based on sound moral values to successfully combat the myriad challenges of life.

Every student has left an indelible impression on the sands of Time – be it faint, clear, deep or even abstract which we will always cherish.

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