# 'Prayatna': A Student Led Initiative to Empower Underpriviledged Children Through Education

–-Raji Ajwani Ramchandani*, Ashima Sharma**,
Nachiket Anekar**, Vikash Kumar Mishra**

## ABSTRACT

*A robust education system is the cornerstone for building a strong nation. Government of India led initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, Right to Education Act are some efforts made to provide universal education to children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. However these efforts appear to have received a mixed response. Quality education still remains an elusive goal. A recent study (ASER, 2015) states that in rural India, half of the children enrolled in Grade V cannot read matter pertaining to Grade 2. Reading ability even among children enrolled in private schools in rural India is poor. Close to half of all the children lack basic skills in Math and English. Amenities such as usable toilets, availability of drinking water are lacking in rural Indian schools. The situation in the urban slums pertaining to education, is a relatively unresearched area and hence not much data is available regarding the quality and the impact. Against this backdrop, the paper describes the case of 'Prayatna' which is a student led initiative to provide quality education to poor children living in the slum areas of Hinjewadi, Pune (Maharashtra). Since its inception in 2008, this NGO has helped 30 children. The dilemma for the NGO is to generate sustainable funding sources and motivate the beneficiaries, parents and volunteers which are accompanied by the challenges of managing varied aspirations.*

**Keywords:** *Education, Urban, Poor, Pune, India, RTE, Empowerment, CSR, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rte, Symbiosis*

* Assistant Professor SCMHRD (Symbiosis International University), Pune, Maharashtra, India. Email: raji.ajwani@gmail.com
** All the Co-Authors are First Year MBA Students SMHRD, Pune, Maharashtra, India.

## INTRODUCTION

India, with 1.21 billion people has almost 17.31% of the world's population. Every year an estimated 26 million children are born in India, nearly 4 million more than the population of Australia[1] . An absolute increase of 181 million in the country's population has been recorded during the decade 2001-2011, however there is a reduction of 5.05 millions in the population of children aged 0-6 years during this period. Interestingly the decline in children is 2.06 million and in female children is 2.99 million. The UNDP Human Development Report, India placed India 119th out of 169 countries in 2010 (134 in 2011)[2].  Nearly 55% of the Indian population suffers from widespread deprivation and nearly 612 million live in multi-dimensional poverty. In addition, with nearly 17% of the world's population, India just has about 1% of the global forest land and 4% of water. Agricultural land is shrinking and employment and although the services sector is the fastest growing sector in India (Mukherjee, 2013). However poor infrastructure and lack of basic services like healthcare, quality education creates a 'double jeopardy' of sorts: raising the cost of service delivery and not guaranteeing employability due to the unsatisfactory profile of candidates that are a product of an archaic education setup .

Government of India (GOI) initiatives like the *Sarva Shiksha Abhyaan*, Right to Education Act (RTE), under which every child between the ages of 6 and 14 receives free education, the midday meal program, have received a mixed response and although there has been marginal improvements, the statistics reveal a concerning picture. A recent study (ASER, 2015) states that in rural India, half of the children enrolled in Grade V cannot read matter pertaining to Grade II. Reading ability even among children enrolled in private schools in rural India is poor. Close to half of all the children do not basic skills in math. Basic amenities like usable toilets, availability of drinking water are lacking in rural Indian schools (see table 1below)

Since the 1980's a growing trend of private schools even in educationally backward states[3] has made 'quality' education expensive (see table 2 below)

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1  Source: http://mospi.nic.in/mospi_new/upload/Children_in_India_2012.pdf accessed on May 14 2015.

2  Hindustan Times Nov 2 2011 http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-ranks-134-in-human-development-index/article1-764014.aspx accessed on April 28,2015

3  The states referred to are : Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Gujarat

**Table 1: Details of Basic Amenities in Rural Indian Schools (2010-2014)**

|  | In %ages | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Amenities | 2010 | 2014 |
| Availability of Drinking Water | 72.7 | 75.6 |
| Usable Toilets | 47.2 | 65.2 |
| Usable Girl's Toilets | 32.9 | 55.9 |
| Computers | 15.8 | 19.6 |

(Source: http://www.asercentre.org)

**Table 2: Trends: Rising Private School Admissions & Private Tuition Costs**

|  | % age of children (Std I to VIII enrolled in Private Schools | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State | 2006 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Punjab | 41.6 | 45.2 | 49.3 |
| Haryana | 44.4 | 49.7 | 53.6 |
| Rajasthan | 27.9 | 41.2 | 43.5 |
| UP | 32.2 | 50 | 52.8 |
|  | High Private tuition states | | |
| West Bengal | 3.7 | 6.5 | 8.4 |
| Odisha | 4.7 | 7.4 | 8.9 |
| Bihar | 13.7 | 7.7 | 11.2 |

(Source: http://www.asercentre.org)

Although the population of slums accounted for 24.1% of the urban cities (having a population of over one million) (Census of India, 2001), the scenario in case of the urban poor (slums) in terms of education is relatively less researched (Govinda, 2002). A few household surveys conducted in slums examine educational deprivation among children. While poverty is a leading cause but there are other factors that result in such a deprivation (Dyer & Rose, 2006). In the Indian context these factors can be closely related to gender, caste, labour market opportunities, the quality of learning and the facilities available in schools (Mukherjee, 2013). Another deterrent is the skew of schools in India offering primary schools in India but fewer higher education opportunities (see figure 1 below)   The overall picture of the education in India thus implies that educational opportunities for the urban and rural deprived are far lower than those for the affluent sections of the population.

**Fig 1: Distribution of School Types in India**
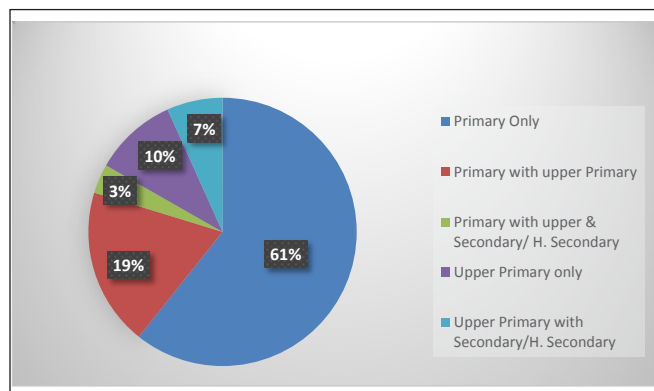


Source:  DISE 2011

This case study seeks to present an overview about the efforts made by the graduate students of a premier B-school in trying to find a solution of sorts in order to  bridge the gap for quality education by the lesser privileged kids that reside in the slums around the campus. These kids are children of hawkers, street vendors, and domestic workers and would not have been able to afford access to education otherwise.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2: has a brief review of literature Section 3: covers a brief overview of some of the government and private sector initiatives being undertaken to improve the state of affairs. Section 4: provides details about "Prayatna' such as the mechanics of the model. Section 5:  enumerates the challenges faced by the team and section 6 discusses the future plans of the NGO and section 7 has the concluding remarks.

## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to (Espinoza, 2002) research has consistently shown that 3 and 4 year old kids who attend high-quality preschool succeed at a higher rate in kindergarten –both academically and socially. Similarly the inspiring work done by (Heynemann & Loxley, 1983) covering countries such as Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East concluded that the predominant influence on student learning was due to the quality of schools and teachers. This finding was in contrast to the findings from previous research in the area which attributed student learning to family background, environment. A World Bank report by (Verspoor, 1989) reviewed 21 educational change programmes supported by 42 World Bank assisted projects and found that the most successful programmes have

a different profile than the less successful ones. The former had three critical success factors for implementing educational reform programs: (1) administrative development to strengthen institutions and organizational structure, including the development of innovative management; (2) significant components for in-service teacher training; and (3) strategies to gain the commitment of implementers, external agencies, and government authorities. (Hanushek, 1995) recommended a radical concept of incentives, decentralized decision making, and evaluation which he referred to as alien terms to education, in both industrial and developing countries, since he felt that they hold the key to improvement that has eluded policymakers pursuing traditional practices. He stated that the conventional approach to view the choices between providing broad access to education and developing high-quality schools was incorrect and that a focus on broadening the school footprint often resulted in grade repetition and high dropout rates leading to a significant waste of resources. On the other hand he cautioned that 'quality' is not simply increasing inputs. (Granthan McGregor & Bun Cheung, 2007) studied the national statistics pertaining to the development of young children in developing countries. They identified two indicators: prevalence of early childhood stunting and the number of people living in absolute poverty-to use as indicators of poor development. They found that both these indicators are closely associated with poor cognitive and educational performance in children and used them to estimate that over 200 million children under 5 years are not fulfilling their developmental potential. Most of these children live in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. These disadvantaged children are likely to do poorly in school and subsequently have low incomes, high fertility, and provide poor care for their children, thus contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Certain government and private initiatives to remedy the state of affairs are described below.

## AN OVERVIEW OF GOVERNMENT & PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

### Government Initiatives

The flagship programme for achieving universal elementary education is GOI sponsored initiative called *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*[4] (SSA)[5]. It has been operational since 2000-2001. It came into existence vide the 86th

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4   In Hindi this translates to ' Education for Everyone'
5   Source : http://ssa.nic.in/ accessed on May 7 2015

amendment to the Indian constitution and makes free and compulsory education to children in the age group of 6-14 years- a fundamental right. SSA is being implemented in partnership with the state governments and aims to address the needs of 192 million children in 1.1 million habitations. It aims at improving the number, skill levels of teachers and enabling the building of a corps of qualified teachers.  Grants for improving teaching material and strengthening of the academic support structure are envisaged (MHROD).

The *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) is another initiative to make secondary education easily available to all. An information and technology based initiative called  '*Shalaa Darpan*' was launched in the last quarter of 2014 under the aegis of the Modi led government. Under this initiative, parents of students studying in government schools will get mobile updates about their child's academic progress and attendance.

## Business & Civic Society Initiatives

Prominent business houses such as the TATAs and the Mahindra's have been participating in the process of providing quality education either by setting up educational institutions of repute or by creating separate platforms vide their CSR efforts.  The TATA group spawned Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) has a vibrant social entrepreneurship program which has in turn helped to churn out education focused initiatives like '*Apni Shala*' which works with children from low-income communities and help to build their emotional, interpersonal and thinking skills . The Mahindra Group has two initiatives in this area. 'Nanhi Kali'[6] was started in 2005 and supports education of 100,000 girls across 9 states in India[7]. The Nanhi Kali team works with 19 NGO[8] partners. Selected girls are given inputs in Math, Science, and Languages as well as provided with the books, uniforms and materials necessary for school. The second initiative is called the "Mahindra Rise'[9]. In this case, employees from various companies of the Mahindra group partner with NGO's working in the field of education, healthcare and livelihoods. Some other NGO's that specialize in working in improving education delivery and quality among economically backward sections of the urban neighbourhoods are: Teach for India and 'Make a Difference' (MAD). Both these organizations

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6  Nanhi Kali when literally translated from Hindi into English is 'Young Buds'
7  Source : http://www.nanhikali.org/what-we-do/reach.aspx
8  NGO: abbreviation for non government organization
9  Source: http://m.mahindra.com/What-We-Do accessed on May 16 2015.

work through a network of volunteers, that are selected based upon a pre-determined criteria. 'Pratham'[10], is a joint venture between UNICEF and the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai. Under its aegis, multiple programs to supplement school education, such as learning support classes, libraries and additional learning resources. A hallmark of these initiatives is that Pratham engages volunteers from local communities and trains them to run various programs. Other than these, educational institutions like IIM-A[11], IIM-U also have student led initiatives that are based on a similar theme.

## PRAYATNA

Prayatna is a registered Non-Government Organization run by students of Symbiosis Centre for Management and Human Resource Development (SCMHRD)[12], Pune, Maharashtra. It was founded in 2008 by a group of students who were moved by the plight of a street hawker who was struggling to educate his kids. He wanted to send them to a school which followed the English medium of instruction. The associated expenses and high private tuition costs in order to provide supplementary inputs to bring his kids on par with the others, were the major deterrents. The students decided to pitch-in by providing his kids and some other children who were facing a similar problem, with a solution. They arranged for the costs of the fees, study supplies and teaching material by pitching-in with their own funds. Math, Science and English were the main subjects in which the poor kids needed guidance and accordingly training modules were prepared and delivered by the B-school students. Apart from the kids, awareness building activities are carried out for the parents. Special emphasis is made on developing the overall personality of the child as well as confidence building and communication skills.

### Profile of the Location, Students & Volunteers:

From 8 students at the time of inception (2008) to 30 students at present (2014-15) and the metamorphosis from a college committee to an NGO- has been journey filled with joy, trials and learning opportunities for the volunteers. The kids covered by the initiative are residents of the slums

10  In Hindi this translates to 'the first'.

11  The IIMA initiative is called 'Prayas' (means the effort). See http://www.iimahd.ernet.in/ for details

12  SCMHRD is a constituent of the Symbiosis International University. See www.siu.edu

adjacent to SCMHRD which is located in the information technology (IT) Park in the western part of Pune. The city is the seventh largest metropolis in India and is among the leading IT destinations in India. Approximately 20 IT companies comprising leading names such as Accenture, Credit Suisse, Infosys, Wipro, Emcure to name a few –have a presence in the area. Once considered a small village[13], Hinjewadi has mushroomed into a hustling business centre .Traffic congestion is a major problem and a host of small businesses have sprung up alongside leading brands such as McDonald's, Pizza-Hut, Marriott, Radisson in order to cater to the business which is the by-product of an extremely heavy footfall[14]. An estimated 2.25 lakh people commute to the area everyday for work. The beneficiary kids come from households where the main source of income is via small jobs. The parents of such kids are street hawkers, small business (tea-stall, paan-stall) owners, fruit and vegetable sellers etc. See figure 2 given below for details.

**Fig 2. Proportion of Children Coming from Households
with the Following Main Occupations**
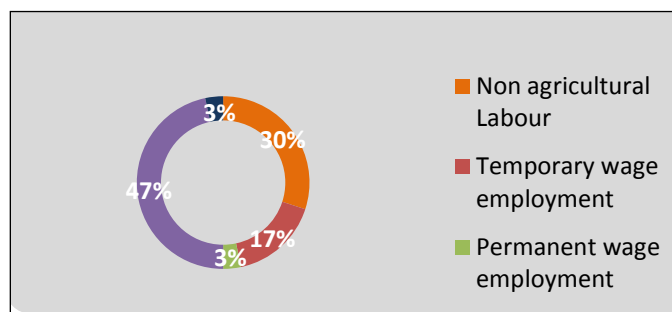


On an average the student volunteers spend about 500 contact hours per annum with the selected children. Of the total 30 beneficiaries, 10 are fully sponsored[15] while 6 are partially sponsored. So far the criteria of selection, has been the need of the student and most of the beneficiaries are children who live in common neighbourhood pockets and have approached Prayatna for assistance. (See fig 3 given below for the sponsorship status of the selected kids)

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13  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinjawadi

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15  The volunteers cover all the costs i.e. tuition fees, books, transport to and fro from school, supplies and provide free personalized teaching in case of fully sponsored beneficiary. In case of partially sponsored candidates, apportion of the costs is borne –usually more than 50%

**Fig 3: No. of Children Associated with Prayatna Directly(2014-15)**
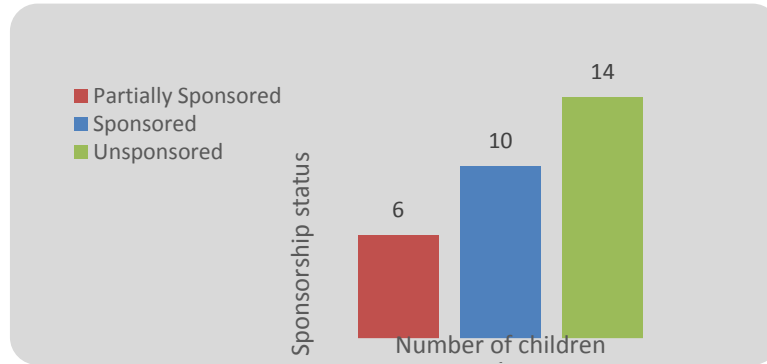


The volunteers comprises of the senior and the junior students of the full time graduate MBA program of SCMHRD. The senior batch of students has a selection process to induct the junior team in June every year (when the new batch of MBA students begins the academic year). Interested applicants are put through a multi-stage selection process that involves screening the applicant's resume, a group discussion and an interview with the senior student team members. New incumbents are screened to identify volunteers who can help to build a team that possesses the skills to develop teaching materials in English, Math and English. The ability to work with children coming from a challenged socio-economic background is considered during the volunteer selection process. Due care is to have equal representation of both the sexes on the student volunteer team (see table 3 for details). The education-work profile of the volunteers is usually 3 to 4 years of IT related work experience preceded by a bachelor's degree in engineering, science domains. Since SCMHRD attracts students from various parts of India, the volunteer team is an amalgamation of like-minded individuals from diverse states, languages ethnicities and a mini India of sorts!

**Table 3: Composition of the Student-Volunteer Team from SCMHRD**

| Year ( MBA Batch) | No of Males | No of Females |
|---|---|---|
| 2013-15 | 4 | 3 |
| 2014-16 | 5 | 5 |

## Teaching Methodology & Operations of Prayatna:

The teaching plan and strategy is customized to suit each student (beneficiary) profile. The entire volunteer team gets together and talks to

the child in order to understand his/her aspirations, subject preferences, difficulties and problem areas. This helps the team to gauge the starting point for beginning the training intervention. Another challenge that the team often encounters is the poor level/understanding of spoken and written English among kids more so since they come from vernacular backgrounds. In such cases the basics of English language such as phonics are used. A teaching plan is prepared for each child after the in-depth interview with the child and after based upon the feedback of the team members. A register and excel worksheets are maintained by the team in order to manage the process effectively. Detailed logs about the attendance, topics/chapters covered, evaluations, marks, syllabus covered per student are maintained. Maintaining detailed records per child prevents repetition of topics and subjects. More importantly detailed observations and notes about the progress of each child along with special precautions (if any) help the volunteer team members to function effectively and improve the learning experience for the child. Every day the volunteers spend 2 hours (18:30 Hrs to 20:30 Hrs) with the children. Despite a very rigorous schedule the volunteers plan and adjust the teaching time-table slots such that all the team members are able to conduct this activity without missing out on their own classes, assignments and evaluations. Saturdays are assigned for 'learning-through-fun' activities like showing educational videos, having sessions in drawing, art and music. The volunteer team strives to make learning an enjoyable experience for these kids more so since they come from challenging backgrounds while ensuring that they are able to make the child learn at his/her pace in an interactive manner. The two hours that these kids spend on the campus of SCMHRD is the only time that they usually get to 'live their age' before they get back into an environment where more often than not- they become an extra pair of hands engaged in some income augmentation activity.

## Fund Raising

The main sources of funds are contributions from the student community and alumni. SCMHRD provides the infrastructure (such as classrooms and utilities). The volunteer undertakes fund raising activities by organizing various activities such as: 'tambola' event, a rock show put up by the college band and approaching the alumni for contributions. Prayatna has recently got a clear NGO status and this is expected to give the fund raising activities a boost, since donors will now be able to obtain a tax exemption/ rebate receipt. This is expected to enhance fund collections in

the forthcoming academic year (2015-2016). Awareness building activities by the team include a case study competition based on social issues called "Tatva[16]" and a "Joy of giving" week. This week is organized around Diwali. A "Wish Tree" is erected in the main atrium of the campus with the items sought by the kids (beneficiaries).Students enthusiastically come forward to make these wishes come true. Such activities help in raising funds and more importantly sensitizing the student and the business community around the SCMHRD campus about the issue on hand and the need for adopting a community centric approach to find innovative solutions.

## CHALLENGES & POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

The desire by a group of students backed by consistent efforts has helped to make a positive impact in their community and give 30 young minds the space and the resources that can help them to use education as a segue out of poverty. However the road has been fraught with certain challenges which are described below:

(a) **Sustainability of the Initiative:** Providing the kids with an, uninterrupted access to quality education is costly (refer to figure 4 below for an estimate of the average annual costs of providing school education in private school versus government school). Since this initiative is managed entirely by the students, generating a regular flow of funds is a challenge, especially since the main donors are existing students. As mentioned in section 4 the NGO status for Prayatna has just come through and this is expected to help in tapping into the corporate donations avenue. A rigorous effort to activate the alumni database is on the cards. The new legislation under the Indian Companies[17] Act[18] is expected to open avenues for corporate giving opportunities that can be harnessed towards ensuring the sustainability of the initiative.

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16  Tatva: Means 'substance' in Hindi

17  Source: http://www.pwc.in/assets/pdfs/publications/2013/handbook-on-corporate-social-responsibility-in-india.pdf accessed on May 17 2015.

18  The Companies Act 2013 requires companies with a net-worth of INR 500 crores or a turnover INR 1000 crores or a net profit of INR 5 crores to spend at least 2 % of their average net profit of the immediate preceding year on CSR activities

**Fig 4: Comparative Cost Of Schooling**
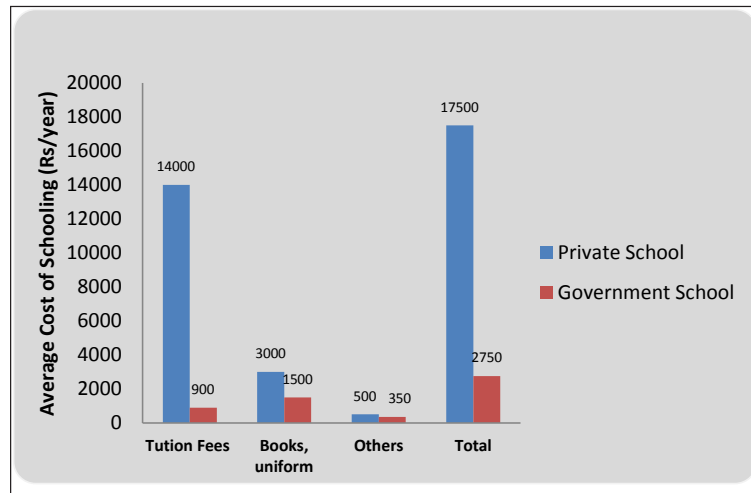


**Fig 5: How do Children Enrolled in Prayatna Spend a 14 hr day**
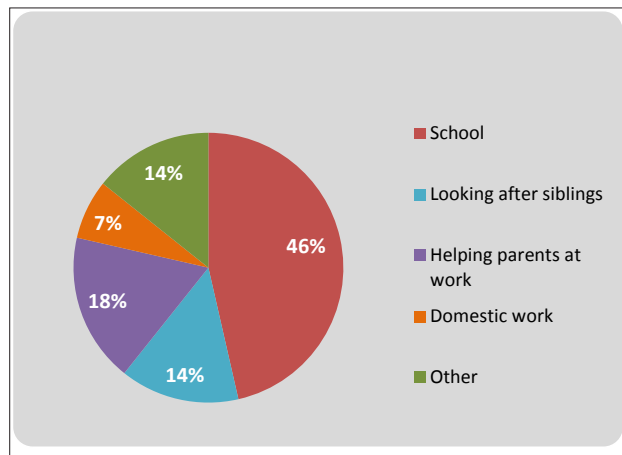


(b) **The 'Free-Loader' Problem:** A, certain complacency has set-in since the kids and the families of the beneficiaries seem to have factored the benefits being received by them resulting in a 'free-loader' problem. The parents, who have an important role to play in the process of enabling the transformation of young minds - are not interested The complete responsibility of arranging the timely payments of funds, teaching etc has therefore fallen on the shoulders of the volunteers-who themselves are students! Some of the common issues are: parents missing Parents Teachers meetings, lack of encouragement and a conducive home environment that can help to

build upon the work being done by the student volunteer team, ensuring basic discipline among their wards and increasing demands by the parents on the volunteers in exchange for allowing their children to continue with the daily training classes at SCMHRD. Refer to figure 5 below for the details of the time spent by a beneficiary child.

The children are rarely able to find any time (other than) when they are in school or in SCMHRD for studying. In almost all the cases they are used as supplementary help in their parents business or deployed in domestic chores. A total of 24 children have dropped out of the programme since its inception (13 boys and 11 girls). The reasons for dropping out are shown in the figure below. As is evident, parents are main reasons for the drop-outs and girls, the larger casualty.

**Fig 6: Reasons for Dropouts at Prayatna**
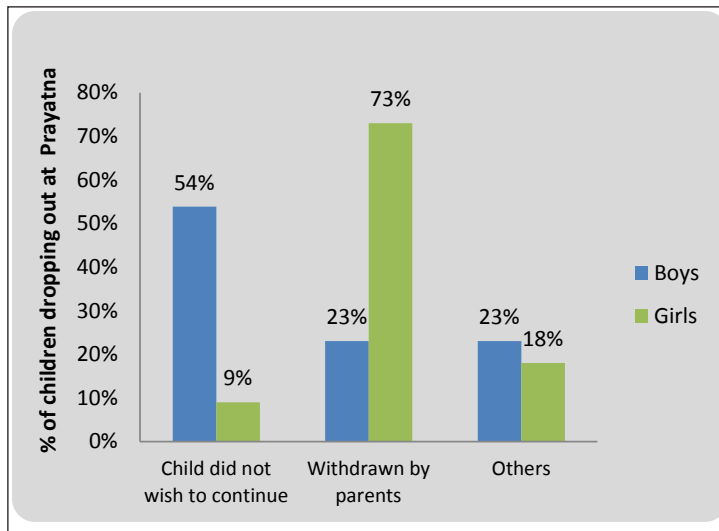


(c) **Overdependence & Workload on the Student Volunteer Team:** The core volunteer team has a grueling schedule of classes, assignments and evaluations. It's common to have twelve hour long class sessions followed by surprise evaluations .The volunteers also participate in other extra-curricular activities and intercollegiate events. Hence managing the teaching and counseling activities in the midst of a packed schedule is tough on the core team members. The low motivation levels among the parents and the students, to complete the assigned work results in a slow progress and mismatch of the actual tasks completed versus planned tasks.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

The team is looking forward to making changes in the present method of operation effective academic year 2015-2016. A proposed model based on the Kurt Lewin change management approach[19] has been developed. See figure 7 for the proposed timeline given below.

**Fig 7: Proposed Approach Academic Year (2015-2016)**
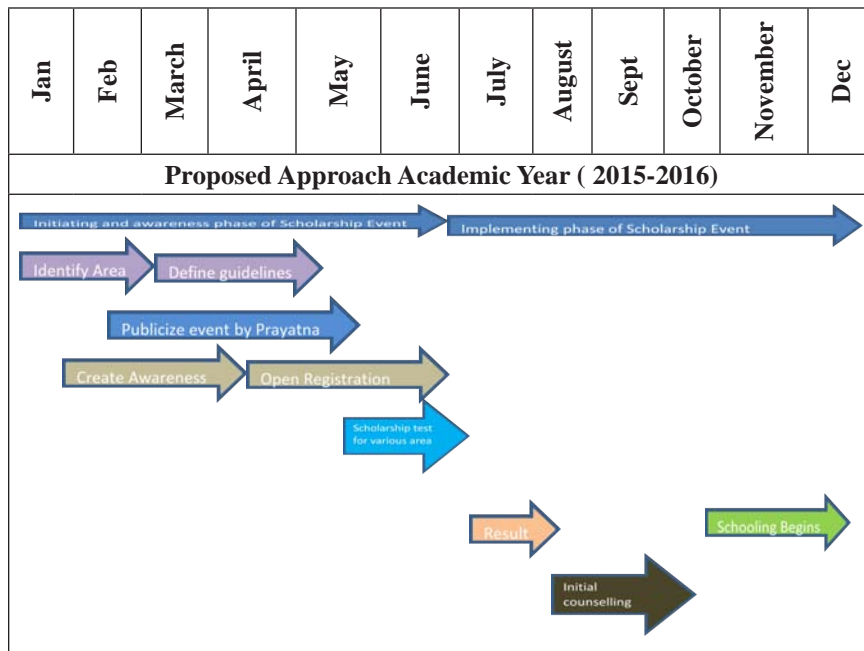


The respective activities pertaining to the model (Unfreeze-Change-Freeze) are given below:

During the unfreeze phase, the crucial aspect is to create awareness among the stakeholders to accept the change. The challenges faced by the team members have already resulted in an internal 'buy-in' of the idea. However a comprehensive communication campaign is planned to communicate the proposed changes and the underlying rationale guiding the change, to the students of the B-school, its alumni, teachers and patrons. Extensive usage of social media for doing this is envisaged. The major changes to the model are: building a partnership model with the neighbourhood schools and greater involvement of the school teachers. Instead of transporting the beneficiary children to SCMHRD's campus (current practice), the Prayatna team plans to work extensively with the

19 Source: http://www.change-management-coach.com/kurt_lewin.html accessed on May 17 2015

teachers in the neighbourhood schools in order to equip them to become effective change agents since they have a wider circle of influence by virtue of spending a lot more time with the kids. This will be done by developing exclusive teaching modules in the Math, Science and English subjects after obtaining the necessary inputs from the teachers. These modules will be run in the area schools by the volunteers. Regular feedback sessions to improvise and assist the teachers are planned in the academic years starting June 2015. The volunteers plan on going to the area schools and conducting supplementary 'after-school' sessions for interested children in these subjects. Instead of the present approach, which is entitlement based – a merit based selection will be adopted. Interested students will be asked to write an entrance exam and will be given a scholarship which will be reviewed every year and renewed based upon performance in school and other parameters such as attendance record, discipline and behavior with peers and teachers, participation by family members, feedback from teachers etc. Team Prayatna has also set out an ambitious target of helping 50 children (instead of the present 30) and want to work on lowering the drop-out rate among the girl participants. In order to do this, a corps of 'mentors' has been proposed. These mentors will guide new enrollees of the program. This is expected to result in a greater involvement from the student community as well as reduce the burden on the existing team members so that the time released can be applied towards devising strategic changes and steering the team accordingly. Once this 'changed' structure is tried and reviewed the same will be frozen until the next academic year 2016-17.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no doubt that a robust education system is an important cornerstone for developing a nation. Infact its importance can be gauged by the fact that it's the second U.N millennium goals. The data pertaining to India in achieving the target of universal primary education for children in the age group 6-10 years is positive According to official records[20] that the net enrollment ratio of 99.98% was reached in 2010-11 – 5 years ahead of the target year. According to the NSS survey 2007-08 the male youth literacy rate was 91% and the female youth literacy rate was 80%. However the catch is that in the Indian context literacy is often equated with the ability to sign ones name although formal definitions of the same

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20  Source : http://www.in.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/MDG%20-%20India%20Report%20 2014.pdf

differ. The data presented in the opening section of the paper and the situations on the ground as illustrated by the Prayatna case study belie the optimism. While there is a significant improvement over the years, the fact remains that a lot more needs to be done to nurture the youth of the country so that they are able to contribute positively towards the task of nation building in an equitable manner. It's a task that requires business houses, communities and academia to contribute since government efforts have had slow success. Education prevents exploitation, helps to mitigate the ill effects of intergenerational poverty and empowers gender and class alike. UNESCO states that literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. Based on this simple guideline, it's evident that the present approach towards providing quality and employment focused education- needs a complete overhaul.

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