

# NEWAGE Youth

Initiative

## Minding ignored needs

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*Sumaiya Iqbal illustrates how The Left Side Classroom, an online initiative by two young voluntary teachers provide books and stationery to unprivileged children*



SOURAV LASKAR

Remember how the smell of newly bought books and stationery like pencils and erasers used to light up our faces in school? New stationery always encourages school children to learn more. In fact, many grownups feel great buying new stationery and books. However, it is getting harder and harder to see children of low income families even remain in schools, let alone buying stationeries and books.

Although education is supposed to be easily accessible at subsidized facilities and government funded schools, but sadly, the truth is that the costs of being a regular student at primary school (for having to buy all the materials needed) prove too much for the low income Bangladeshi families who struggle to put food on their tables. When it comes to making ends meet, a family living hand to mouth has to decide whether to buy a bag of rice or a set of notebooks for the children to write on. Unfortunately, it is the latter that is always forgone, thus leaving behind the needs of the children.

As heart breaking as it may sound, for hundreds of thousands of little kids who come to school with worn out, torn bags and no notebooks to write on; a new pencil, eraser and a sharpener can be deemed

luxurious.

There is one little classroom, however, where this problem (most often ignored) is being addressed in the most inspiring manner. 'The Left Side Classroom' at Kazi Fori Government Primary School at Mirpur in the capital strives to meet the simple requirements of students via directly reaching out to the many generous members of the community through social media. The name, derived initially from the location of the room, now speaks for the many students who are left behind in societies for being underprivileged. The initiative uses the basic idea of collecting donations to provide for the needy students.

Sadia Afrin and Sujon Daring, the two young founders of 'The Left Side Classroom', an online initiative that aims to provide free books and stationeries to children from low income families, launched the initiative on August 23 this year. Both the founders are currently students of Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University and fellows of Teach for Bangladesh. While teaching for Teach for Bangladesh at Kazi Fori Government Primary School, they realized that the only way to facilitate education for their students was by helping them gain access to study materials and stationery. While Teach for Bangladesh aims to make quality education accessible to all, the two fellows took the process one step further by addressing the preliminary concern of poor parents who cannot even provide the basic study materials to their children.

'It is very easy to walk into a class and instruct the students to bring out their notebooks to jot things down. What is difficult is seeing children looking for corners to sit as they hope to hide the fact that they do not even have a notebook to write on, not just for the day, but for months. From the very beginning of our fellowship, this has been a very common scenario,' says Sadia as she gives many such examples. 'There are students who even use old notebooks after erasing the writing on them just to be able to attend classes properly. It is heartbreaking to see little children of grade one or two writing with a pen and not pencils, for the latter is more expensive (owing to added costs of buying a sharpener and eraser),' adds Sujon. He conveys that these children come from the poorest of families with struggling parents mainly working as housemaids, rickshaw pullers, security guards and so on. Helping such families cope without compromising the educational needs of their children is a goal slowly being achieved by the initiative.

They have already successfully collected 100 books (text and story), 120 notebooks, six dozen pencils, two dozen erasers and sharpeners; two dozen pens and more. All this in a little less than two weeks! Only tangible materials are accepted as donations for such goods directly meet the needs of the students and also prove easier to deal with. Primary school children hardly get any story books which can help them learn immensely, the initiative aims to also meet this need of unprivileged children. What is also encouraged is a sense of gratitude among the children, as being grateful for the gifts they are given can spur their interest in studies more. What further is developed in them is a sense of responsibility towards their possessions. The main source of motivation for the team of two is seeing the children they help work harder every day.

Currently, the initiative is being run by Sadia and Sujon most passionately at Kazi Fori. They plan to expand once their fellowship ends. There is the scope of having needs of other classrooms featured on the 'Left Side Classroom' which operates via Facebook. Youth members are also being reached out for contributing as 'Campus Ambassadors' who will help assess needs of schools in particular areas and then inform the public of the needs through the initiative's page. Soon, there will be drop box points to make it easier to donate and be a part of the change. Community members will thus be able to play a more active role with the project.

Working on a sustainable solution to the problem of inaccessible education nationwide will need more and thus Sadia and Sujan have plans to make community visits and conduct needs assessment regarding education in the various regions. Since every family has its specific needs, the team plans to introduce solutions to the most common barriers to education for children, thus slowly moving with a holistic approach to the problem.