

# The method of Education for the Blind

by Helal Khodgir Sohely

ONE way to become acquainted with the problem of blindness is to put on a blindfold for a few minutes. Could you dial a telephone or eat a meal neatly? Could you find your way around the house or tell a penny from a dime? Without the use of sight, blind people must learn or use their other senses so skillfully that they can do all these things.

Blind children learn about the world around them by reaching out and touching things with their hands.

In school blind children receive an education equal to that received by sighted children. They follow the same course of studies. But some changes in materials must be

made. Blind pupils learn to listen closely, to type lessons for classes, and to develop skill in mental arithmetic. They learn to use a special alphabet called braille. Textbooks are prepared in braille, recorded on records or tapes, and read to the students. The children are taught enough handwriting to sign their names and write

came a teacher. The letters on the braille alphabet are based on a system of six raised dots that the blind can read with their fingertips. Braille codes have also been developed for music and mathematics.

Braille is produced by punching dots into heavy paper with a pencil. Like stylus. Since the dots are pushed down into the heavy paper, the paper must be turned over to be read. One dot is A; another added below it forms B. To save space, combinations of dots may mean common words or parts of words, such as "for" or "tion". The first ten letters of the alphabet also stand for the numbers 1 through 10. Using a braille writer, it is possible to write as many as six dots at once by pressing six keys.

### A Talking Book

The world of books is open to the blind today through books prepared in braille and through long-playing recordings of books, called talking books. The largest producer of braille textbooks is the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky.

The library of Congress of the United States, Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, in Washington, DC, has hundreds of thousands of braille volumes and talking books. Hundreds of new library titles are recorded and brailled each year. Throughout the country there are libraries that act as distributing centers for these books and records. They are mailed postage-free.

BRAILLE ALPHABET AND NUMERALS									
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t
u	v	w	x	y	z				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0

made to make the course fit their special needs.

Maps and diagrams are outlined with raised lines. Dials and watches have raised dots placed on their faces so they can be read with the fingertips. Rulers also have raised dots to indicate the measure-

short notes.

### Brails and Talking Books

The braille alphabet was developed by Louis Braille (1809-52). He was a blind student in Hauy's school who later be-

### Education of the Blind:

The first school for the blind was started in France in 1784 by Valentin Hary. Later several other schools were founded in Europe. Three schools for the blind in the United States were founded about 1832. Since then classes for blind children have been a part of the American school system.

One child in every thousand in the United States has a loss of sight serious enough to need help from a special teacher. Almost 30,000 children are legally blind that is they see no more than the large top letter on the standard eye chart used for testing vision. Of these, 75 per cent attend community schools. The rest go to boarding schools for the blind.

Before blind children go to school, it is important for them to play and to attend nursery schools and kindergartens with children gifted with sight. Parents, brothers and sisters are required to spend more time with the

# How Sanctions are Hitting the Schools in Iraq

by Barbara Nimri Aziz from Baghdad

**UN-imposed economic sanctions are hitting education in Iraq. The government has cut back on school meals which it once financed nationwide. Books and journals are in short supply and many institutes have been closed. As the new academic year starts students seek scarce second-hand textbooks. Yet, reports Gemini News Service, Iraqi children have not lost enthusiasm for learning.**



In Iraq the school textbooks are running out.

SCHOOLS across Iraq have reopened for the new academic year with the role of education in limbo. Economic hardships due to the United Nations-imposed embargo against Iraq have led to a decline in school attendance.

The signs are in the streets. Boys aged 10 and 12 are selling chickens and younger kids begging—a situation unknown before the war. They have to help buy food for the family," says an embarrassed onlooker.

School supplies are so expensive now that a family may have to put out 150 Iraqi dinars (two weeks' salary) to furnish their child's school needs. The government has cut back on school meals, which it once financed nationwide. It is still providing school supplies, but there is some doubt how long basic textbooks needs can be met.

Paper in Iraq is imported and stock now is so low that even government newspapers have reduced the number of pages and editions they publish. Some bookshops have closed. A small private publishing company, started by an enterprising writers' group after the Iraq-Iran war, is shut.

Despite economic difficulties, schools now reopened after the summer recess are full. Says principal Subhalla Abdullah, of Hikina girls secondary school in Al-Outaifich, a middle income suburb of the capital, "our enrollment is as before." She does not know of any child who cannot attend school because of poverty. "And if I hear of anyone, I will myself ensure that the student gets what she needs. I and her teachers will find the means."

In the senior class of 17-year-old at her school, 35 career young women work at their English lessons. They are keen to speak to a visitor. The English language is still one of the most popular subjects among Iraq's youth. English remains essential for anyone taking up medicine and scientific subjects.

From Hikina school, 50 of last year's graduating class went on to higher education. The top students, especially young women, strive for careers in medicine. The number of girls in medical schools is at least 50 per cent, as before the war. Like their mothers, young Baghdad women are career-oriented; and current

economic hardships are an extra pressure on young women to find jobs.

In the decade before the war, the Iraqi government gave high priority to education. Men in colleges were exempt from military service. Schools were established in every corner of the country and primary education was obligatory. The literacy rate dropped. Iraq women had the highest literacy rate and percentage of women in the wage labour force in the region.

Whether this standard can be maintained is now in question. Parents of school-age children feel the government must do much more. Many

families will need subsidies to keep children in school.

The Hikina school lobby, shattered when a missile hit the neighboring building in the 1991 war, is yet to be repaired. And teacher's salaries remain at the pre-war 300 dinar a month while inflation is running at more than 3,000 per cent.

Parents complain that more investment is needed in the nation's education. They criticise lavish government spending elsewhere. In fact schools reopened within weeks after the end of the bombing of Iraq in March 1991, even before water and electricity services were restored.

Much of the burden of maintaining morale in a deteriorating national climate falls on teachers. This includes professors at Baghdad's Central Teaching Hospital where medicines are in short supply and essential medical journals are not available. College teachers find it increasingly difficult to teach without up-to-date textbooks and journals, most of which usually come from abroad.

In some respects, in the economic struggle underway in Iraq, the educated class is the most vulnerable. Engineers, writers, pharmacists, travel operators, international consultants, scientists, even surgeons find themselves without work. Many of the projects and institutes where they once worked are closed. Travelling abroad is impossible as Iraqis cannot as before obtain foreign visas to conduct international trade and attend scientific meetings. "Iraq has been turned on its head," said a government employee with a masters in economics, "no one values our education now."

The educated middle class, on fixed incomes, and severely affected by the economic sanctions note a new merchant class frequenting elegant clubs and buying heirlooms. With the war, new fortunes are being amassed by merchants controlling the import and sale of high priced embargoed essentials, a stable smuggling trade, and the market in foreign currency.

Essentials like vegetable and milk, and imported luxuries are available but at a very high price. The educated feel at their mercy, and there is growing bitterness over the declining prestige of culture and education.

Nevertheless, schoolrooms remain brimming with the love of learning. Last year's competition for prized university seats was as keen as in the past. The highly reputed Al Aquida Girls School has 52 students per class, over-enrolled because of parental pressure on the school principal. As the new academic year starts a new generation of university students seek out scarce second-hand textbooks.

One feels that as Iraq's economic and moral continue to deteriorate, and the future is increasingly hazy, these young minds will pay the highest price. — Gemini News

# Ex-Illiterate, Now Best-selling Author

by Wang Zhengzhong and Wang Qi

**This once-illiterate biographer re-creates the lives of talented Chinese women to give them their due recognition and to show that one can rise above the difficulties of being poor and being a woman**

AUTHOR Shi Nan never had any formal schooling, but she caught the attention of millions of Chinese with her first writing effort, a biography of the celebrated woman artist Zhang Yuliang.

The book was published in 1983 and soon became a best seller with sales of over 300,000 copies. The book is being filmed jointly by the Shanghai Film Studio and the Taiwan Jinding Film Corporation, and is being translated into English, French and Japanese.

From being librarian in the small city of Anqing in East China's Anhui province, Ms Shi herself has become a celebrated author of nearly 100 novels, biographies and short stories, portraying women artists, teachers, workers and prostituted women, in modern and ancient times.

But artist Zhi's biography, seen by the author as an expression of her "own aspirations and outlook," remains Ms Shi's favourite.

An orphan from an impoverished family, Ms Zhang worked in a brothel and was married as a concubine. Later she turned to painting, and her work was so good that she was appointed a university professor. As a sculptor, she became the first Chinese artist to be recognised by the Gallery of Modern Art in Paris.

Ms Shi, who was 45 when she completed the book, shared Ms Zhang's experiences of struggling to rise from the bottom of society.

Rejected by her parents for being a girl, Ms Shi earned her keep as a cowherd in a small Anhui village. She became literate when already a teenager, after joining a literacy class.

Then she worked in a factory for more than 20 years. Having developed an interest in literature, she spent her noon breaks reading Tolstoy, Balzac and Hugo as well as Chinese classics.

Ms Shi was 41 when she joined the Anqing Municipal

Library in 1979. Finding parallels of her own experience with that of Zhi Yuliang, Ms Shi decided to do the biography.

But soon the differences loomed large to almost overwhelm her. Whereas librarian Shi had lived all her life in Anhui, artist Zhi "saw much of life—from Yangzhou City in East China's Jiangsu province, to Wuhu in Anhui, then to Shanghai and abroad to Paris and Rome."

Ms Zhang also lived through various historic eras from the 1911 Revolution through to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). She underwent "tortuous development of self" as she went from one vocation to another.

Another difficulty was that Ms Shi never met the artist, who died five years before the biography was started. Ms Shi had to work with second-hand information which only roughly outlined her subject's life.

Nether could Ms Shi tour the country and abroad to follow Ms Zhang's tracks. What she did was to "travel in books", reading up history, travel notes, folklore, Roman architecture and paintings and sculpture by Renaissance artists. "Even if the biography needed only a single reference to them, I would browse among the large amount of material at hand," says Ms Shi.

For example, to familiarise herself with the layout of urban Paris in the 1930s, Ms Shi read through the professional journal World Architecture, making nearly 10,000 note cards on the subject alone.

She had hardly completed the first draft when Ms Shi felt severe pain in her eyes, diagnosed as optic fatigue and

pressure inside the eyes. She was advised to rest. "But how could I? I learned massage from a friend who studied acupuncture. In writing, I had to pause every 12 minutes to massage my eyes."

Ms Shi had to do her writing outside of office hours, rising at 4 am to write until dusk, resting then writing again deep into the night.

"I just could not extricate myself, but gave vent on paper to the passion in me. I wished to tell the world that as long as your goal is lofty, willpower steadfast and pursuit consistent, you will fulfill yourself even if you were a woman with little education and living in unfavourable conditions."

After one year of daily writing and reading, she finished the book. Readers nationwide soon acclaimed it for its exquisite style and detail. No less than Liu Haisu, doyen of Chinese artists under whom Ms Zhang studied, says that "the book faithfully represents Ms Zhang's life of a long struggle."

The book was reprinted in more than 20 newspapers and journals from over 20 critics. It was also staged by various theatres and received offers at home and abroad for film adaptation. Letters came from France, the United States, Spain, Hong Kong and Taiwan seeking publication rights.

Ms Shi has made it her mission to do the biography of talented women long overlooked, and "give them their due credit."

So far she has done four other biographies and all her work are described by noted writer and critic Jiang Liu as striking in their "description

of women's pursuit of independence and freedom, and their challenge of destiny."

A fastidious critic, her husband Cheng Bi gets first crack at Ms Shi's stories. "Each of my books contains his wisdom. I find him a truthful company and a bosom friend," says Ms Shi. "He takes pleasure in my rising fame, instead of feeling uneasy about it."

Although in poor health, Cheng Bi copies his wife's manuscripts, and has transcribed all three versions of *Frozen Willow*, the story of a sharp-minded prostitute of the mid-17th century who sought happiness and personal freedom.

—Depthnews Asia

### The ABC Method

# What Do Our Kids Know?

by S. Bari

adult literacy material.

By the beginning of 1992, the group had come up with a method that took 4 weeks to carry out and cost less than US \$ 15,000. "It is," Unicef's regional education advisor Barry Harley proclaims, "the first and best initiative of its kind and it was conceived entirely in Bangladesh."

### Defining basic education

ABC defines basic education as the three R's and "life skills", or those bits of knowledge necessary for survival. The instrument is designed to interview all children between 11 and 12 (just past the official primary education age of 6 to 10), regardless of whether they went to school or not.

Divided into 5 sections, ABC deals with a child's background first. Parents are also asked questions. A socio-economic profile quickly emerges. "It's rough and ready," admits Chowdhury, "but it gives us the essence."

### Asking them what they know

Children have to answer a series of reading questions. Words are chosen from different themes and with increasing levels of difficulty. "Mother" is from a theme central to daily life; "savings" is meant to transmit a social message; "co-operation" falls in the abstract category.

Similarly, sentences rise in complexity.

A comprehension passage describes a farmer with savings and a small family. Children are absorbing important development issues while answering simple questions on the passage.

In the writing section, the child is to write his or her name, certain words, and sentences. Finally, he or she has to write a letter conveying the fact that they have passed the test.

The numeracy section includes counting from 40 to 50, writing and reading numbers, and simple arithmetic. The computing is couched in situations that would come up in the child's daily life.

Life skills that Bangladeshi children are expected to know are mainly health related, though some are attitudinal: the treatment of diarrhoea, prevention of night blindness, cleaning water, which water is safe, vaccination benefits, latrine use, ideal family size, whether girls should go to school, prevention of disease in cattle and poultry, and treatment of fevers.

### Naysayers and complications

Critics contend that the life skills show a definite bias to-

wards Unicef, a prominent actor in the campaign for immunization, sanitation, and diarrhoea treatment, and also the financial support for the pilot ABC. However, if the motivation is indeed to keep a funding agency happy, that does not detract from the validity of the life skill questions asked.

Life skills can be redefined for a more urban setting, where a child would need to know road safety or how to deal with waste disposal. Faced with ever-growing fuel lines of communalism, surveys could also think about having a question on the equality of religions. It has been proved that religious and gender attitudes are acquired early in life.

Another section that could be polished is the writing exercise. It turns out that writing a letter is meaningless to many children in rural settings: unfortunately, letter writing is part of the Bangladesh census' official definition of literacy. Harley shares his field experience: "When we asked the kid to write a letter, we drew a complete blank. He didn't have a clue how to go about it. Then we asked him, 'What's that dam over there? What is it like?' And this kid started scribbling away, writing about the ducks and the water."

Complications that could await ABC on a national level are administrative entangle-

ments. Bangladeshi representatives at last week's workshop introducing ABC suggested that the survey be carried out at the district level, but there was some uncertainty as to whether the analysis of the data would be at district or divisional level. Proponents of decentralization prefer the former, but it remains to be seen if the district can handle the responsibility.

Participants from other countries (Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives) plan to contract research institutes to carry out analysis of the data they hope to gather from ABC. In Bangladesh, universities could lend a hand.

### A skeleton to flesh out

The details may be hazy, but many planners consider this fluidity a desirable quality. "You can tailor the basics," says an enthusiastic Nepalese educationist. Even Sri Lanka, which has a primary education system that is the envy of the region, went home determined to apply ABC in its own way: "We may change the questions or even the categories, but the method has given us a skeleton that we can flesh out any way we want."

By using the information ABC provides, government and non-government planners can fine tune their programmes. "You can see that it's taking 5 years for a child to learn what it should be learning in 2," Harley points out. The initial ABC in Bangladesh shows that after a year of schooling only 29 percent of children can read the word "Mother," a monosyllable in Bengali. However, 63 percent know the treatment for diarrhoea. Something is rotten in the kingdom of primary education.

In this age of communications, information is a valuable tool. Just as the computer will not call up the file unless you punch Enter, ABC will remain dry, academic theory unless both government and non-government, formal and non-formal educators learn to profit from the information it reveals.

(This is the concluding part of a two-part feature. The first part was published in the Weekend Magazine on February 26, 1993.)

# A Unique Information Network

AN Information Network on Rural Development (INRD) has been established in Bangladesh following an initiative taken by the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP). This national information network will be a part of a regional information network which CIRDAP plans to establish with the participation of all its eleven member countries. INRD links 27 government, non-government and international organisations working in the area of rural development and provides a channel for gathering and disseminating information on rural development. To facilitate the functioning of INRD, a working committee comprising representatives from the Forest Directorate, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Community Development Library (CDL), Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) and CIRDAP has been set up with CIRDAP as the coordinator. A task force will draw up to the

long-term work programme of INRD, taking into consideration the needs of network members.

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Other activities planned by INRD include the compilation

of a catalogue of publications issued by the parent organisations of INRD members, and an index to the activities of these organisations covering ongoing research projects, workshops and seminars.

### Library Facilities at CIRDAP

CIRDAP's library is open to the staff of government, non-government and international organisations, the students and staff of the universities, and to other interested persons.

The library contains an up-to-date collection of books in the social sciences and a specialised collection on rural development. Over 356 periodical titles, research reports, conference and seminar papers and audio-visual materials are also available for use. It is also the depository library in Dhaka for World Bank publications. A computerised bibliographical data base allows easy access to and retrieval of information.

In addition to reference library facilities, the library will provide: photocopying services, bibliographical services and referral services.

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Following the Jomtien Conference on Education for All in 1990, Bangladesh decided it needed a benchmark survey to measure what its children knew. Traditional methods of assessment took forever and cost the earth.

"We got down together in November '91," says Dr. Chowdhury. "On the advisory board were many education experts, from Unicef to the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, ICDDR3 and the Institute for Educational Research."

Key players included BRAC, whose non-formal education has directly affected thousands of children and won worldwide acclaim, and Friends in Village Development Bangladesh, which has designed excellent



Letting children know that schools do not always wear grim faces may enhance their interest for learning.