

Grow Your Reader: A Book Bank for Underprivileged Children

SHABABA IQBAL

Reading plays a crucial role in children's overall development. It is a highly immersive experience that allows them to use their imagination, and curiosity and makes their minds come alive. However sadly, the Bangladeshi community has not yet established an entirely reader-friendly environment. For a start, many Bangladeshi schools have a very limited number of fictional stories in their curriculum, and in dwelling on or stressing over school pressures, children often do not find the time to pick up books outside of the classrooms. In addition, most bookstores in Dhaka are decorative stationary shops that mainly sell textbooks and a handful of mainstream fiction books. More importantly, the underprivileged children in our community rarely find any opportunity to develop reading habits.

Recognising this issue, Sadia Jafrin and Amina Azad started Grow Your



PHOTOS: COURTESY

Riding Hood is a particular favourite of my students." He also explains that he incorporates reading with active participation, role-playing, and dialogues to make things more engaging for his students.

With Grow Your Reader, Jafrin and Azad have surely touched the lives of numerous students. However, on their journey to starting the project, Azad and Jafrin had to overcome a number of hurdles and incidents of sexism. Since they both are women, many people did not take them seriously at all at first, but they did not allow those experiences to hold them back. Instead, Jafrin and Azad went ahead with their project with a greater sense of empowerment and inspiration. They also struggled to address some issues like limited resources and flexibility. At the beginning, purchasing books was expensive for them. In response to that, they ran campaigns on Facebook and requested people to give away second-hand books or make monetary donations to their project. "With the terrific appreciation we received, our biggest challenge now is that, our number of readers is more than our number of books," explains Jafrin. Now, they are providing e-books to schools that have ICT facilities and the children in these schools have learnt about the new innovations in technology through these e-books and encyclopedias.

Within the next three years, the founders wish to build partnerships with different organisations to spread their mission all over Bangladesh, establish Grow Your Reader stations all over the country, play an integral role in forming libraries in different schools that need them, and familiarise underprivileged children with e-libraries. "We believe that reading can truly help children to grow into knowledgeable and well-rounded individuals. We hope that Grow Your Reader serves as a platform for underprivileged children to become the best versions of themselves," says Jafrin.



Reader in August 2016. Grow Your Reader is a project that provides underprivileged children access to different kinds of books other than books in their regular curriculum. Both Azad and Jafrin are currently pursuing their Master's degrees in Education and Leadership Development at BRAC University and working as Teach for Bangladesh fellows.

When asked how and why Grow Your Reader was conceived, Azad and

Jafrin recall meeting a young boy while having tea outside one day. The boy was reading a short story about a farmer and a king. "He was very excited and engrossed in reading the story. We discussed how it would be great if every child had access to reading different books," says Jafrin. She also adds that, it is important to nourish the creativity and imagination of children and one of the best ways to do that is to inspire them to read different books. This is why Jafrin and Azad started their project and branch out the availability of books in Dhaka.

With this initiative, these two young women aim to address how stories can be a stepping-stone for academic learning and gathering knowledge. This is because, oftentimes, most students learn by rote, without understanding the subjects. Stories can help students to better understand and enjoy what they are reading, which can in turn help them in learning their school subjects better. Stories also instill social values within young students. "Children's reading habits should be nourished.

Reading stories that have meaningful messages can help children grow into great leaders of tomorrow," says Azad.

Grow Your Reader's first station at Gawair Nabin Government Primary School began with only 216 books in both English and Bangla. Within the first two months of its inception, the response to Grow Your Reader proved to be widely positive, which inspired the founders to broaden their project across the city with four more stations. So far, Grow Your Reader has stations at Gawair Nabin Government Primary School located at Dokkinkhan in Uttara, Amtoli Staff Welfare Government Primary School in Mohakhali, Walkup Government Primary School in Mirpur, Rajmushuri Government Primary School in Dhanmondi, and Mahora School of Performance and Creative Arts in Purbo Jurain, Kadomtoli. They provide books to these stations and people who need them borrow the books from their nearest station for a certain time period. Jafrin and Azad are committed to making a difference to the underserved

communities with the help of Grow Your Reader. Predominantly, Grow Your Reader lends books to schools and primary school teachers who can inspire students to read daily. "Currently we have around 2000 readers, most of whom are children who belong to the underserved sectors or low-income neighbourhoods," explains Azad.

Saud Hussain, a fourth grade teacher at Nureralha GPS, struggled to find reading materials for his students since his school did not have a library and also because the curriculum books included very few stories, and mainly focused on grammar and writing skills. That is when he came across Grow Your Reader. He believes that Grow Your Reader is widely making a difference in the self-confidence of his students. "Exposure to the storybooks has improved the fluency and vocabulary of my students, especially when it comes to their spoken English. They now ask many questions, which means they are practicing their analytical thinking skills. Reading aids their writing skills as well," says Hussain. "The Little Red

More conversations, less moral policing!

AFSANA AZIZ NITOL

The one common element in the recent rape or harassment cases is the 'victim blaming'. As we know, moral policing exists in society and has been there for long. However, it is not being helpful for the victim, or for the society as a whole.

Instead of the blame-game, we should stop for a second and actually listen to what the victims have to say. What we need now, is to have more conversations to minimise the communication gap, in order to eradicate moral policing.

On July 29, 2017, Footsteps, a development based social enterprise in Bangladesh, came up with an open space for women to express their voices and showcase their work. These women run their own organisations and work passionately to bring about positive changes. According to the President of Footsteps, Rafayat Chowdhury, it is "the first of many such initiatives", and was held at the Press Club. The 'Open Space- Discussion on Women empowerment, Sexual Harassment and Consent' panellists discussed on issues like misogyny in culture and society, indigenous women's rights, self-defence in tackling sexual harassment, sexual harassment, sexual rights and education and its relevance in combating sexual harassment.

The first speaker of the panel, Shagufe Hossain, said that the statistics and news make us ponder on how through culture and language we are promoting misogyny in our society. Usually, 'the girl is dishonoured' is the kind of language used after a rape case. When a rape case is reported, one narrative that we keep hearing is that, this is a result of overall moral degradation of the society. Thus, we shift focus from that particular subject and bring in many other issues with it. Instead of holding the

perpetrator accountable, we start holding the whole society accountable with such narrative.

Even Muktasere Chakma Sathi said that we need mutual respect and understanding to solve issues. She works for the rights of indigenous women, who are subject to assault solely based on their origin, ethnicity and background. Moral policing has been a fact here too. Indigenous women gets tortured because of not wearing her traditional clothes to functions, taking pictures with Bengali people who do not belong to their community etc.



PHOTO: AKIB ABDULLAH

We hardly see reports of their violence on the media. Sathi thinks that the situation has gotten worse because of keeping their mouths shut for too long. Now, it is high time they speak up.

Syeda Samara Mortada, representing Bonnishikha, an organisation that provides an open space for people to share their stories, said they include stories of masculinity too. Through the stories, it becomes transparent how patriarchy is affecting men too. It puts pressure on men to be the bread-earner of the family, while they fail to pursue their passion. She also believes it is important to pay attention to choice and consent of men and transgender people too. Hence, people would not blame feminists if they

knew how patriarchy is demeaning both men, women and transgender people at the same time.

Mariha Zaman Khan, lecturer of LCLS, said their institution encourages participation of women in cultural activities, something our society does not approve. However, one of the categories of sexual harassment in our law now actually states that forbidding women from participating in sports or cultural activities will too count as sexual harassment.

Project Attorokkha, founded by Zaiba Tahyia, has been training women from urban slum areas for

basic self-defence classes. Tahyia does not promote violence and wants women to be physically empowered through basic self-defence classes.

Sara Hossain, advocate of Supreme Court of Bangladesh, said that along with awareness we need to think of actions as well. Judging women based on the 'sleeves' and clothes they wear will not ensure us justice for sexual harassment.

By judging and fighting with each other, we have failed to ensure a secure society. It is high time we went beyond the traditional mindset and come to an understanding of the minorities. By discussing issues and having more of such conversations, we can sympathise with the victims and demolish moral policing.



ARTWORK BY: TAIARA FARHANA TAREQUE

Indian Summer

"In youth, it was a way I had
To do my best to please,
And change, with every passing lad,
To suit his theories.

But now I know the things I know,
And do the things I do;
And if you do not like me so,
To hell, my love, with you!"

Dorothy Parker, *The Complete Poems of Dorothy Parker*

English Language Carnival held at Ideal School and College

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ

Regardless of how brilliant and resourceful a student might be, the fear of communicating in English is still a prevalent hurdle that many students have to cross. With this in mind, Motijheel Ideal School and College hosted the first ever "IELC National English Language Carnival," where Star Youth of The Daily Star was the media partner.

It was essentially an Olympiad designed to help students showcase and improve their English language skills in a fun and interactive way. The event was organised by the Ideal English Language Club, who worked for days to make this event a reality. "We often see many talented students not achieving their full potential because of their reluctance to speak or write in English," says Anik Saha, the Vice-President of the club. "When we

were discussing what we could add to this event, student-interaction and fun were our focal points. We have many programmes today that will surely encourage the participants to learn English in a fun way," he adds.

The Language Carnival took place on the 4th and 5th August, 2017, with different events taking place on each day. Various activities followed the Opening Ceremony. 'Spell Master', which resembled the popular 'Spelling Bee' format, was exceptionally engaging when it came to student interactivity. There were English Olympiad, Brainstorming session, Wall-Magazine display, 'Fiction War' and a myriad of things to do. The carnival welcomed students from all major schools in Dhaka, and among the diversity of characters, the students had shared a similar fondness of English Language.

The second day of the festival had continued

with Spell Master and had included an Extempore Speech, where students had to give an impromptu speech on selected topics. The segment provided a very entertaining and creative push to not only the ones who participated, but also to the ones who watched. The day, however, had mostly been designed to judge and reward the students for their prowess in different sections of the carnival. The final formalities were followed by the musical performances in the ending ceremony, where everyone including the volunteers let loose and enjoyed the performances by talented young musicians. "We want to keep on trying to engage students in learning environments beyond their textbooks, and hopefully we can continue this carnival for years to come," says Anik. By the looks of it, both the English Language Club and the Carnival are here to stay.



PHOTO: AKIB ABDULLAH