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## **Bridging the Education Divide by the Department of Service Learning (Outreach) of Loyola College, Chennai: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Service Learning (Outreach) at Loyola College, Chennai is an eye-opener for the students to find many harsh realities which still exist in Indian society. It really motivates students to be human. Exposure to the urban realities in the slums of Chennai city makes every student of Loyola College understand the lives of the poor and low strata of society. Exposure to rural villages makes the students to understand the stark naked realities of the rural folk. Intellectual development is constantly taking place through formal learning and teaching in the classroom by their respective teachers, but then classroom teaching could not provide seasoning the heart of students. Therefore, this need is addressed by the Department of Service Learning (Outreach) through its various activities and programmes.*

**Key words:** education divide, Department of Service Learning, Loyola College, India

## **Introduction**

“A man once said that small drops make a mighty ocean”. I would like to add that the ocean would not be what it is but for those small drops of water.”

Education is a human right. Loyola College has always played a yeoman role in providing education in India. Over the years, Loyola College Management in Chennai has realized that education should make a direct impact on those who are deprived of this basic right. It is in this light, Loyola College (Autonomous), Chennai run by Jesuits in Tamil Nadu started the Department of Service Learning (Outreach) during the academic year 2001-2002. As of now, this department undertakes several programmes that cater to the marginalized sections of the city of Chennai with a specific reference to the people residing in slums. These include youth welfare, women empowerment, health, hygiene and sanitation, supplementary and remedial coaching, etc. This article focuses on how students of Loyola College through the department of Service Learning play an active role in enhancing the education of poor, dalit and marginalized children who are studying in schools run by government and schools run by minority institutions in Chennai city.

## **Background and Key Aspects of Service Learning (Outreach)**

The Department of Service Learning (Outreach) since 2001 has been offering numerous programmes for both undergraduate and postgraduate students of Loyola College. LEARN (Loyola Empowerment And Reach out Network) offered to the sophomores of Loyola College. Through this programme, we enable through education the marginalized section of people

living in 32 slums of Chennai city in the zones of 5, 7 and 8. The unique features and main aspects this programme includes:

- Exposing students to understand the types of slums where the marginalized sections of the society are living with bare minimum facilities.
- Meeting the different stakeholders such as children, women in general and widows and deserted women in particular, senior citizens, differently abled and the youth with a view to learn from the lived experience of the people in the slums.
- Facilitating Loyola students to plan with the people for taking up development and welfare programmes to benefit the stakeholders.
- Enabling the students and the community leaders to start tapping the required resources for the benefit the community in general and stakeholders in particular from the government departments and also non-government organizations such as Rotaract Clubs, Lion's Clubs, Enviro Clubs.
- Enabling people to ask for their rights by writing petitions and Applying RTI to the department concerned.
- Building a strong network with likeminded organizations and NGOs to fulfill the 'Rightful' needs of the people

### **The Unique Features of Students Teaching Team (STI)**

- Build on what students know
- Teach them by showing through charts, drawing, actions and demonstrations
- Students also learn by doing
- Students do not make it as a showcase but a system pattern
- Not odds and ends but a system

- Students are enabled to not to conform but to transform themselves and society when they come to position in their lives, wherever they are in
- Students are never made to relief but release
- Students learn their social responsibility as a good citizen of India to serve this nation; they are educated by their tax payers' money in India.

## **The Need**

There has been a widespread notion prevailing in the minds of society that schools run by government and the Corporation of Chennai have not provided quality education when compared to English medium schools run by private management and non-profit organisations. It has been in part due to lack of adequate teachers, irregularity of existing teachers, limitations imposed there on. In simple terms, the problem resolves itself into a ratio between students and teachers where in the former are too many in numbers and the latter are too less. Consequentially the limited staff is faced with problems of discipline, control and providing adequate attention to their young charges. This results in an overall poor learning atmosphere for the young minds.

The Loyola Outreach Programme as under the Department of Service Learning has dedicated good quality education to overcome the above mentioned limitations to a corporation Schools and schools run by minority institutions in Chennai. This is done so by using Loyola college's most prized work force; the students. This has a dual impact as it not only improves the education provided to the corporation schools and schools run by minority institutions but also results in sensitizing the students of Loyola College, Chennai to the existing issues plaguing the education system in Indian society.

## **Our Strategy**

As under the Outreach Programme, the second year under graduate and Post-graduate students of our college complete a hundred and twenty hours of service to the marginalized communities within the city, particularly the slums of Chennai. The issue of teaching in corporation schools is taken up by a section of our students. The following are the activities taken up by students on a voluntary basis within the corporation schools:

- Identify the weak students and conduct remedial classes (in particular English Grammar and Mathematics)
- Create awareness among the students on health, hygiene, sex education, child rights, child abuse, children's day and Literacy day, etc.,
- Conduct training programmes on communication, leadership, personality development and moral values.
- Teach them the habit of keeping the class and campus clean
- Encourage them, by participating along with them in games and sports
- Commemorate the important days in the school (Literacy Day, AIDS Day, Children's Day, Independence Day, Teacher's Day, Republic Day, Gandhi Jayanti, etc.)
- Organize training programme on career guidance, legal rights, human rights and consumers rights, Child rights

## **Benefit to Loyola Students**

The impact of such a programme has been positive from the word 'go'. The sensitization of students has resulted in taking up additional activities beyond their department of Service learning that have greatly benefited the student charges. Loyola College, as the great temple of learning in Tamil Nadu

has been pleasantly surprised and encouraged by the level of enthusiasm shown by its students. This has reaffirmed our belief in the inherent empathy lying untapped in the student community. In this day and age when the youth are attributed with the worst of things, we feel in this respect they have proved their worth several times over. The Herculean amounts of work put in by Loyola students stands as a testimony to the success of its programme. Besides the awareness the students of Loyola College have received, the Outreach Programme has also been a platform for them to gain leadership qualities, communication skills and nuances of working as a team.

### **Benefit to Corporation School Students**

We, Loyola College have been witness to an interesting phenomenon in the department of Service Learning - a phenomenon dubbed by some as the reason for the success of the program. We call this phenomenon the “sibling relationship”. The students of Loyola are sent to schools run by corporation and government in order to educate, enable and coach students studying in those institutions have formed a rather unique student-teacher relationship i.e. the students consider their “teachers” more as kindly elder brothers and sisters. The relationship built between the students of our college and the students of the corporation schools has had a fruitful impact on the students of the corporation schools. The student charges have in turn responded splendidly to this “sibling relationship”. This relationship has greatly compounded the interest levels among the students of corporation schools and has resulted in the creation of a healthy and interactive learning environment. It is a great joy to us to witness our young charges and their young charges growing in education and awareness.

“The Loyola College students have fitted into the niche of teacher cum elder siblings, resulting in the opening up of students to their teachers in the far more personal level. The Loyola students with their enthusiasm and innovation have brought about programmes that have caught up our corporation school students in the world of learning.” - Teacher, Corporation School, Chetpet, Chennai

## **Conclusion**

The question we need to ask ourselves at the outreach department is “Have we reached the end we sought to?” The answer is “YES”. However our achievements need to be viewed in the light of the work yet to be done. And at this juncture this can only encourage us to look forward to the work that needs to be done. If there is a challenge we are confident that we will reach-out together and overcome.

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