

Final Report on a Summer Internship with Agami: June - July 2023

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1 Introduction

The Agami Education Foundation (AEF) is a nonprofit organization aimed at providing quality educational opportunities in underfunded schools in Bangladesh. Where the private and public sectors of Bangladesh's education system fail to reach every student, the various program initiatives created by AEF step in to supplement the learning of underprivileged children in Bangladesh.

As a Bangladeshi-American student, now in my final year of high school, I have had the unique opportunity to experience a variety of school systems across the world; beginning with European-based Waldorf and Montessori schooling in my early childhood, transitioning into the mainstream American public school system, spending a couple years in a private school in Dhaka, Bangladesh, experiencing private institutions in California, and finally, returning to public high school in California before I enter university. My unique educational background inspired me to seek field experiences in the school systems of Bangladesh, through which much disparity is exposed and tackled by nonprofits such as Agami. Over the six weeks of my stay in Bangladesh, from June 19 to July 31, I have worked in the observation and documentation stages of AEF school programs, regarding school visits conducted alongside Agami team members. As an outsider to Bangladesh's education system, the internship was an opportunity to gain more insight into the unique dilemmas in providing education in underprivileged areas. This report documents my internship, the observations I have made, and the experiences and insight I have gained throughout.

1.1 Team Members

Throughout this internship, I have worked most closely with the following five members:

1.1.1 Mustafijur Rahman & Dr. Sabir Majumder

Mustafijur Rahman (Parvez) is the Director of Operations on the Executive Committee USA; he was my first point of contact upon reaching out to Agami. Dr. Sabir Majumder is the President of Executive Committee USA; through his guidance, we held several meetings to discuss my interest in Agami and the possible activities I could conduct through Agami's Dhaka operations during my stay in Bangladesh.

1.1.2 Somiron Gregory

Somiron Gregory is the General Manager at Agami Education Foundation (AEF), overseeing the heads of the various school programs such as Teachers' Training, the Library Project, Life is Fun, and more. Upon arriving in

Dhaka, my first meeting was held with Somiron Gregory at the Agami office in Dhanmondi, where we discussed the nature of my internship and met with the heads of the other school programs, including Soma Roy, Nusrat Tuli, Nayim Uddin, Joynal Abdin, and others. They provided me with short overviews of their programs and particular aspects that I could assist with and/or observe. Through his guidance, I was able to contact school project leaders and schedule school visits. During my stay in Bangladesh, Somiron Gregory was the main supervisor of my internship and its activities.

1.1.3 Soma Roy

Soma Roy is an intern with the Library Project, joining in April 2023, with an educational background at Jagannath University (IER) Institute of Education and Research. The co-leads of the Library Project are Tahiea Taz and Mashiat Mustaq; Soma was my point of contact with the Library Project, especially during our visit to the Switch Tahmina Banu Bidyaniketan School in Mohammadpur. She was a great source of assistance during the visit, integrating me into the Library Project's activities and encouraging me to fully explore the school and Agami's operations conducted there.

1.1.4 Rahima Rima

Rahima Rima is the head of marketing at Agami, overseeing outreach through the website, blog, and media platforms, as well as serving as the editor of Agami's quarterly newsletter. We first connected upon my expression of interest in Agami's newsletter, due to my experience writing for my high school's newsletter and several local publications in Southern California. After completing the primary aspect of my internship (school visits) and returning to California, we have established a regular line of communication in order for myself to assist with marketing activities from the United States, such as the blog and the newsletter.

2 **Activities**

2.1 School Visits

The school that I had the opportunity to visit was the Switch Tahmina Banu Bidyaniketan School, located in Mohammadpur in Dhaka; the visit was conducted on Thursday, July 13, 2023. The school was founded by the Switch Bangladesh Foundation (SBF), a non-governmental organization (NGO) started by Dhaka University graduates with the aim of breaking generational poverty in focus areas of Bangladesh.

2.1.1 Program Observed

The school program along which I attended was the Library Project, an initiative to bring literature enrichment to underfunded schools through a mobile library. Through contacts with publishing companies, the Library Project procures its stock of books of all genres, intended for ages roughly 10-15, and distributes them among

students on a borrowing basis. Upon completion of their chosen books, students conduct a book report in the format of their choosing, including speeches, drawing, plays, and more.

2.1.2 Timeline of Visit

During most of the school visit, I toured the various classrooms (from the grade levels of 5 to 8) with the Library Project; their team consisted of Soma Roy and a few other university student volunteers. Their duties consisted of passing out books, instructing students on how to follow the library borrowing system, and asking students to share some of their favorite previous books. Teachers and Library Project team members introduced me to the students; later, the teacher currently instructing Class 6 selected six students for short individual interviews at my request, conducted by myself and filmed on my phone. During the interviews, I asked students to introduce themselves, describe their accessibility/enjoyment of books before and after the Library Project, share their favorite genre of books, and describe their plans for their future career.

2.2 Marketing Responsibilities

Towards the end of my stay in Bangladesh, I met with Rahima Rima to discuss areas of marketing that I can assist with as a student in the United States. Taking into account my background in writing content for newsletters/newspapers and working in graphic design and social media marketing, we came to agreement on a role for myself: writing a minimum of one article for each quarterly newsletter (based on information sent by school programs' heads), compiling content for social media platforms, and contributing to the blog through posts about my internship experience.

3 Observations & Outcomes

3.1 The positive long-term influence of Agami's operations is significant and noticeable in this particular school, which gives me strong interest in returning to Bangladesh to tour Agami's other schools. In my personal belief, the greatest long-term impact of AEF's school programs lies in the fact that many of them provide supplementary avenues, separate from the main classes of math, English, science, and so on. While the Teachers' Training program from Agami does focus on those subjects, programs like the Library Project (literature enrichment) and Life is Fun (science fairs) focus on providing avenues to pursue extracurricular activities and interests. SBF also provides several extracurriculars, such as coding classes, art classes, and chess clubs.

Just by hearing the wide range of careers that the interviewed students shared with me - doctor, actress, scientist, teacher, chess player - one can understand that it is important for students to explore their own interests outside of classes in school, for not only are those extracurricular options given to students, but they have gone above and beyond in pursuing them. The Agami office within the school has one wall lined with "Life is Fun" trophies, won in inter-school science fairs by the students of this school; another shelf holds countless chess trophies from students ranked internationally. From my conversations with them, the students themselves

take great pride in these accomplishments and have a strong sense of self as a result; these achievements have also become well-known in the surrounding community, creating greater entries of students each year. Seeing the evidence of high-achieving students in interest-based programs means to me that Agami is truly achieving their initiative of providing quality education. From my perspective, with the educational background that I have had in America and Bangladesh, the definition of quality education is one that provides many avenues for students to flesh out their interests and identities, while always building skills in core subjects that are useful for a vocation in the modern age.

3.2 One potential bottleneck observed with the long-term influence of Agami's presence in this school is the capacity to expand over time. Although SBF and Agami have certainly done their part in building student achievement and available resources to attract families of students, one underlying problem observed was the ability of schools and programs to expand alongside a rising student. For example, a young student in Class 6 right now has only a couple years left in the Switch Tahmina Banu Bidyaniketan School, as it only goes up into Class 8. After that, their educational path is unclear; Agami's programs will have provided them with strong skills and interests, but there is no immediate path to follow that will not require some financial commitment or relocation, both of which are considerable hurdles for underprivileged students and their families. The ability to trace Agami's role in helping a student achieve secondary/post-secondary education is a much broader goal, one that the organization is already working on, but one that would be momentous to observe.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Expansion of school programs

Though there are already a large number of school programs in operation, exploring extracurricular activities further (coding, art, chess, etc.) would be a worthwhile endeavor, considering the success of such programs instituted by the Switch Bangladesh Foundation. Not only do they motivate students to explore their own individual interests and strengths, but they also present benefits to all students by encouraging creative thinking and worldwide applicable skills of problem-solving and communication. These are some of the most valuable skills that a school environment has to offer, in my opinion, alongside a strong base in core subjects. The digital age has also democratized access to quality educational opportunities (after taking into consideration accessibility of technology); AEF has already begun exploring that path through Khan Academy Bangla/Agami EdTech, and perhaps school programs based on a rotating collection of devices could open up further extracurricular avenues online.

4.2 Expansion Beyond Primary/Secondary Education

There is significant work to be done in primary/secondary schools, and Agami's focus on these areas is especially important as these years cover the crucial ages at which a child experiences the most development. However,

once a student has taken advantage of that quality education for as many years as possible, Agami could begin working on laying out a path for them to continue pursuing an education/career, to ensure that students do not have to halt their aspirations because of financial/situational hurdles. Whether this be through programs that help students finance their education, or opportunities for students to gain vocational training/experience in a workplace, it is a thought that may lengthen Agami's legacy on a group of young students.

4.3 Measuring Progress of a School Program

One dilemma discussed by the Library Project and myself was a way to clearly measure the effect of the Library Project on the reading aptitude of students participating in the project. An idea of a physical test was brought up, but the Library Project team presented objections, as a test would encroach upon the leisure aspect of the Library Project. Another possible way to measure the Library Project's progress could be a simple survey, verbal or written, but one that does not require academic questions. The effectiveness of the Library Project and other school programs is necessary to measure but must be done in a way that does not detract from the experience of the school program itself.

4.4 Formalizing a Program for International Interns/Volunteers

Agami has a very well-developed marketing presence, through various platforms mentioned above such as a newsletter, website, etc. - it was primarily through these platforms that I was able to find and learn more about Agami, without any prior knowledge or contacts, and eventually reach out to inquire about an internship. These avenues for interested and motivated young students to get involved are important to maintain, for not only does they increase awareness of Agami's mission but also cultivate a new generation who can gain professional experience in their field of interest and stay on to expand Agami's scope of influence through their unique skills. One step in this direction could be creating a more standardized program that international interns/volunteers can participate in upon visiting Bangladesh or working from a location abroad, with structured roles, responsibilities, and schedules within their department(s) of interest.

5 Conclusion

As previously described, being raised in America gave me the opportunity to experience a range of different school systems; with that background in mind, this internship demonstrated that the problems presented by a conflicting public/private school system in America are different from those presented in Bangladesh, but the similar disparity exists nonetheless. Though each system offers some unique benefits - for example, financial ease or better teachers - there is ultimately an enormous gap in opportunities and achievement between private schools, government schools, and the ones that are neither. In systems such as that of Bangladesh, where the best education can be bought with a large tuition and the government might lack enough resources to go around, students such as the ones I met and conversed with in Switch Tahmina Banu Bidyaniketan School are overwhelmingly overlooked, despite representing a large part of the population.

What Agami Education Foundation has done is step directly into the communities of those students, into their existing schools, and find areas in which they can assist and raise the quality of education being provided. As an aspiring public policy major in university next year, observing Agami's work with the student demographic at the lower end of the educational gap was a crucial turning point for myself; to truly shape effective policies that provide greater equity in education, one must first understand what it takes in resources, personnel, and dedication to close that gap. Interning with AEF has given me an opportunity to gain that understanding, through my vantage point into their school program operations.

The school programs each have their own story and purpose, which I wish I could have explored more during my time in Bangladesh; however, with the Library Project, I received a true sense of Agami's mission, especially in the interpersonal connections formed between interns, volunteers, and students. Although I had a language barrier to overcome, my stilted Bangla and the students' enthusiastic English were able to bridge the gap, and I felt that those conversations were perhaps the most important takeaways of my internship. No matter how small a role I might have played in simply observing and interviewing that day, I always felt it was crucial to form a connection with the subject of my work, and indeed, I felt that my contribution really meant something by getting to know these students, so similar to myself in Bangladeshi origin and a drive to learn, yet different in other ways. Conversely, I hope that those students have also benefited from meeting myself, another student just like themselves from across the world who was interested in their school and their activities and had a desire to see them grow even more. Though I may not meet them again, continuing to work with Agami is my way of encouraging their ever-growing achievements and accomplishments at the Switch Tahmina Banu Bidyaniketan School, and at the other Agami schools that I hope to visit in the future.

6 Supplementary Pictures



Class 6 students holding up their selected books during a short session with the Library Project on library book etiquette.



A group of Class 6 Agami students selected for the interviews led by myself (second from left) along with Soma Roy (far right) and another Library Project volunteer (far left).



Observing a fast-paced chess game between two students during a break between classes.



Conducting an interview with a Class 6 student in which we discuss her experience with the Library Project and her future aspirations for education and a career.