

Living away from family to dream big and aim higher

Residential facilities meant to break cycle of poverty come with own challenges



Amelia Teng

Education Correspondent

Twenty-six years ago, a residential school in India opened its doors to children from the country’s lowest socio-economic class. Located in a rural village in Tamil Nadu, the school took in those from ages four to 21, who lived and studied together seven days a week.

Fast forward to today: Shanti Bhavan, the brainchild of professor and entrepreneur Abraham George, now houses about 280 students. All of its graduates have gone on to higher education.

Among them are computer scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs, all of whom make more in the first five years of their careers than their parents will in a lifetime.

The mission of the school, which was featured in a Netflix docuseries, Daughters Of Destiny, in 2017, is to break the cycle of poverty and enable upward mobility. The school, which receives more than 500 applications for just 28 spots every year, has begun work on a second branch in Karnataka, India.

In 2023, a similar – yet also different – facility called =Dreams opened in Singapore, aiming to uplift children from families living in public rental flats.

Like Shanti Bhavan, only one child per family is allowed to join, so that more families can benefit. Unlike Shanti Bhavan, students still attend their regular school during the day.

The space, located at the former

Geylang Serai Community Club in Haig Road, has become a second home for 28 students in Secondary 1 and 2.

The students commute to and from their schools daily, and return to their own families at the weekend. They are given a full scholarship that covers the cost of the programme, and food and lodging on campus.

MORE RESOURCES, GREATER EXPOSURE

Children of rich families tend to go to better-quality schools, have higher cognitive skills and complete more years of schooling.

This is unsurprising: Wealthier parents have more resources to invest in their children, who naturally benefit from the extra lessons, more enrichment, greater number of books at home, and so on. These parents are typically also rich in social capital and networks.

According to one influential piece of research, disadvantaged children hear 30 million fewer words than their peers by the age of three.

In contrast, the odds are stacked against lower-income parents. Not only do they lack time and resources to help their children, the stress they experience on a daily basis can also lead to poor decisions and ineffective parenting strategies.

All this is compounded by cramped living conditions, housing instability, marital conflicts and food insecurity, which put their children at a disadvantage and have long-lasting effects on their physical and mental health.

Initiatives like =Dreams aim to give such children a fairer shot in life, by placing them in an environment with resources that their families would not have been able to afford.

At =Dreams, on top of academic support, this includes enrichment

programmes like sports and the arts, as well as leadership and coding. Residents get homework help from students from Victoria Junior College. The team is also exploring the possibility of a mentoring scheme.

WILL THIS MODEL WORK, THOUGH?

Dr Kit Phey Ling, a senior lecturer from the psychology and child and human development academic group at the National Institute of Education (NIE), said there have been similar schools for disadvantaged students in the United States and China.

The SEED urban public schools in the United States, for example, operate on a “no excuses” charter model, with a heavy emphasis on achievement and discipline. They provide poor students with a boarding programme that prepares them for college.

Not much research has been done, but some findings indicate that these students do better academically, especially in mathematics, she said.

Her colleague from the same group, Associate Professor Gregory Arief D. Liem, said that =Dreams’ concept is novel in the sense that its residents still attend regular schools.

Dr Jonathan Ramsay, associate professor of psychology and associate dean of student engagement at James Cook University in Singapore, said not much is known about residential facilities as a way to increase social mobility.

“But there is a lot of research supporting the effectiveness of similar residential facilities in reducing delinquency and behavioural problems,” he said.

“It seems reasonable to think that a similar approach could encourage positive behaviours and aspirations in disadvantaged youth.”

One key obstacle to equality of opportunity, said Dr Ramsay, is inequalities in home environments, that is, the amount of resources and quality time parents can spend with their



Nurul A'syaqirah, 13, with her mum, Madam Siti Wahiddah, 35, at =Dreams, a boarding facility for children from disadvantaged families. It has become a second home for 28 students in Secondary 1 and 2. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

children.

“If facilities like =Dreams can level this playing field by providing an enriched home environment, while at the same time ensuring that the children spend quality time with their family at weekends, I do think that the children and teenagers stand to benefit considerably,” he added.

=Dream’s chairman Stanley Tan told The Straits Times that the idea of having a residential campus was a result of many years of working with families and children, and understanding the constraints they faced in terms of limited space at home. Parents’ work hours also leave them with little time to supervise their children’s studies.

Students gain encouragement from studying with their peers, and having access to better support for academic and personal development, he said.

But he noted that =Dreams will have to learn from its own experiences and adapt to the profile of its students, rather than imitate wholesale how other spaces are managed.

“Boarding facilities for paying students cater to those who generally are more motivated and better-resourced. But for our cohort, there are additional challenges to address,” he said.

One of these challenges, noted Prof Liem, is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations than more well-off peers.

He said this is where =Dreams could come in, to help them

dream bigger in ways they might not have otherwise imagined for themselves.

Dr Kit added: “Students need to first have an idea of what they want or what they can do. In a place like =Dreams, suddenly they realise there’s so much more out there... other ways of being and living and other possible careers.

“Once they have a goal in mind, it’s easier for them to work towards that goal... and identify the educational pathways that will get them there.”

OVERCOMING HURDLES

The Shanti Bhavan documentary shows with heartbreaking clarity the friction that its one-child-per-family policy has caused. One girl on the show bursts into tears, recalling how her sister resented her because she could not go to school with her.

Mr Tan said capping admission at one child per family is not ideal, but it had to be done because of limited capacity and to benefit more families. “We anticipate that should our students perform well, we are confident they will have a positive impact on their siblings and families.”

Dr Kit said: “Hope is infectious. Knowing that there is a possibility of a better life, knowing that your child is doing well or your sibling is doing better, can be motivating for the other family members.”

For lower-income families, having one child away may free

up some space at home for the rest of the siblings, she said. “Parents might also be able to focus more of their time and energy on the children who are ‘left behind,’” she said.

Some children will take this change positively, while others who are very close to the sibling who is away might feel upset, she said. But some of this can be mitigated by the fact that Singapore is small and students can go home at the weekend.

Families and schools must work together to ensure that the siblings at home have the opportunity to dream big, said Dr Kit. “They may not have the 24/7 type of support... but they stay close to their parents and can also take advantage of other community resources.”

Prof Liem, who has done research on boarding schools in Australia, said that such arrangements have been shown to benefit parent-child relations. “Basically, absence makes the heart grow fonder,” he said.

Dr Kit said: “It takes time to adapt. Some children will be homesick or have difficulty with a different schedule and facility... Maybe having an older buddy to help the new students coming in would help.

“Having constant contact with parents – that’s possible with technology – also helps, and if families can spend positive quality time over the weekends doing things that are fun and enjoyable.”

Acknowledging the adjustments students have had to make, Mr Tan said this includes being apart from their families, entering an unfamiliar environment and living with strangers.

But his team is tasked with “creating a safe place, developing a relationship of trust and supporting the students on their individual journey”, he said – not just by helping them academically, but identifying and developing their other talents and building positive character traits.

The success of spaces like =Dreams also depends on whether a child is ready to live in such a new environment, said Dr Kit.

“It won’t fit every single child. We really need to think about how any setting meets the individual needs of a child and motivates him to do well,” she added. This includes the need for autonomy, a sense of belonging with others, and having mastery or feeling competent in an activity.

In the long run, the hope is that these children’s lives will turn out differently, and that they will dare to aim higher.

Said Prof Liem: “We can’t expect that all of them will get As or go to medical school, but it’s about where =Dreams can help to value-add.”