

The Daily Star

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BBLT-Integrating three different strands

Compiled by TDS Editorial Desk

"I never thought that I would be able to mix with students from the Bengali medium, let alone the English medium! BYLC has taught me that irrespective of the different small circles we represent in life, we are all part of a larger circle - the circle of humanity."

- Mobas Shiran

Picture the face of a 17-year-old madrasa girl who is delighted to be part of a bigger circle. Hold onto that smiling face for a few more seconds. Now erase that memory, think realistically and try to visualize her face again. Was it as simple this time? It was not for me.

Why is it so difficult for us to picture the face of a merry madrasa girl? It is because madrassas are one of the marginalized factions of society; in lacking sufficient interactions with them, it is difficult for us to empathize. Yet we

as a nation cannot march forward if some sections of society are left behind. In order to promote peace and understanding, it is important to build bridges between the different factions, values and voices in society. The Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), the first leadership institution in Bangladesh, was thus founded in 2008 with the vision of creating a more inclusive, tolerant and just society by training the next generation of leaders. BYLC has successfully completed three of its signature month-long youth leadership program, Building Bridges Through Leadership Training (BBLT), a project which was awarded the prestigious Kathryn Davis Projects for Peace Prize in 2008. BYLC also conducts executive programs and workshops for university students as well as clients in the private, public, and non-profit spheres.

BYLC was founded by Ejaj Ahmad, who has a Masters in Economics from St. Andrews (UK) and a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard. He looks back on the past year and half of BYLC's journey, remarking on how far the organization has progressed. "2009 was a defining year for us in many ways. We were faced with the challenge of establishing a new organization as well as reaching out to youth with programs that aided their own personal growth as well as Bangladesh's development. I am pleased to say that we have made considerable progress in the past year on both fronts." After graduating from Harvard in 2008, Ejaj chose to do something a little different, something that would bring about a positive change in the young generation of Bangladesh. He founded BYLC, modeling its BBLT curriculum on the leadership courses taught at Harvard. "Bangladesh lacks institutions that provide a platform for young people to develop leadership skills and participate in the country's development process.



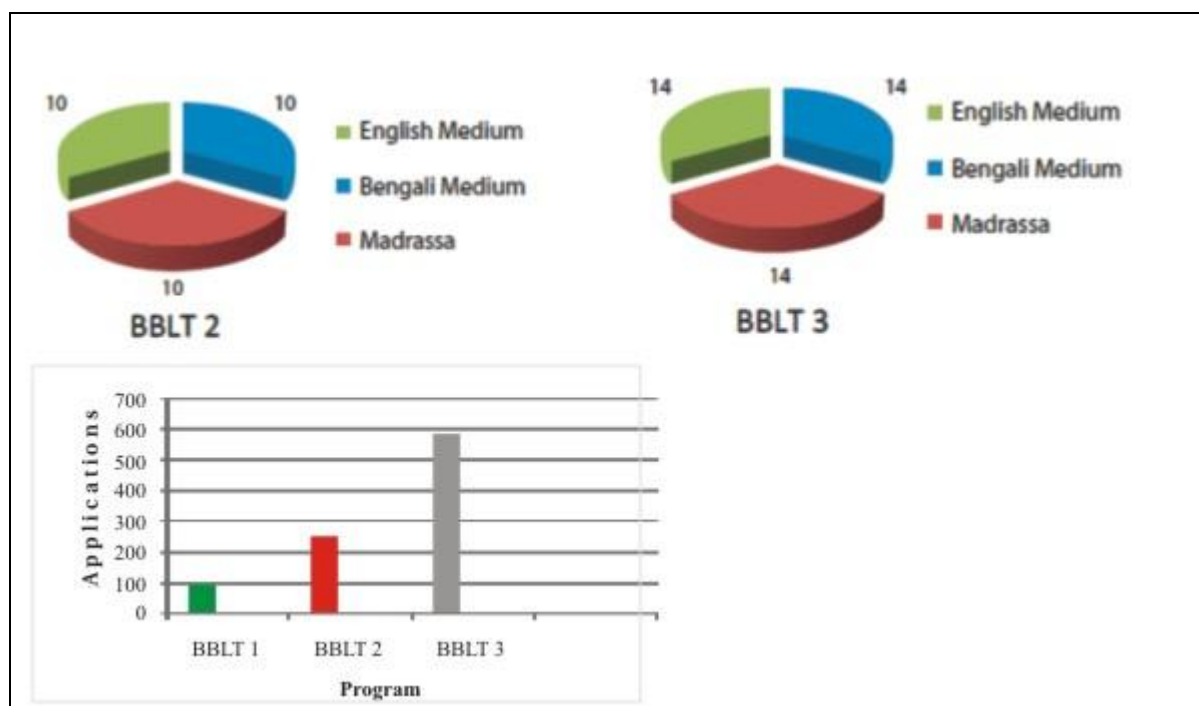
BYLC innovation model

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BYLC was founded to bridge this gap. Closely related to exercising effective leadership is the capacity to embrace diversity and respect diverse values and viewpoints. A root cause of the divisiveness and tension in Bangladesh today is the divided educational system, which has fragmented our youth. BYLC unites youth from the English medium, Bengali medium and Madrassa, an approach through which we aspire to create a more inclusive, tolerant and just society.” The three components of BYLC are: building bridges, leadership training, and active citizenship. BYLC puts an innovative spin on the learning process by taking students through a real-time educational process where the classroom acts as the laboratory. BYLC utilizes a case-in-point teaching method which analyzes students' own failures, pushes students out of their comfort zones and utilizes a personal instructional method that is part Socratic and part experiential. BYLC aims to equip students with the diagnostic mindset, confidence and communication skills necessary to bring social changes amidst adversity.

So far, 102 students have gone through BBLT training, 72 in 2009 alone. There has been clear, rising popularity for the program among our youth, with acceptance rates falling from 31.3% for the 2008's BBLT 1 to 7.2% for BBLT 3. In 2009, BYLC reached out to over 150 schools and Madrassas. Performing over 2100 hours of community service, participants designed and implemented exciting, scalable and sustainable projects ranging from home mushroom cultivation to DIY water filters for villages and slums.



BYLC's influence is showing promising signs. Roxana Akhter Munni, BBLT 1 participant, founded Karushilpo, a social enterprise that employs female acid-attack survivors to produce handicrafts. Ryan Nabil, BBLT 2 participant, launched Youth for the Community, a voluntary community initiative for young people, which distributed winter clothes in a refugee camp and to street-children in Dhaka for its first project. BBLT 2 participants organized a free health camp on the International Youth Day 2009. BBLT 3 participants launched a Young Scholars Program (YSP) to help underprivileged students in the Korail slum continue their secondary education.

BYLC's action-oriented bottom-up approach to leadership training is unique from other developmental initiatives: the focus is not just on service delivery and technical solutions; BYLC attempts to understand and change the values, practices and priorities of young people. It seems like an ambitious and difficult task, but our youth are the roots from which the dreams of Bangladesh, a nation made independent 39 years ago, will sprout and flourish. It is time that we and our government appreciate and mobilize the immense potential that our young people hold.

Alaka Dhara Halder, a BYLC Graduate & Class of 2014, Yale University, has this to say,

"The amazing month with BYLC brought me to the real world. Being an English medium student, I had never met a Madrassa student before, nor had a proper conversation with anyone from a Bengali medium background. As I will pursue my undergraduate studies in the USA, I might not have gotten these chances without BYLC. Here, we were all thrown together. Our class of 30 was a reflection of Bangladesh: its different voices, feelings and needs. We learned how to understand each other so that we could work together for a cause, and not just for ourselves. "

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