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Help is on its way for troubled learners

By Shabnam Minwalla

MUMBAI: Few can imagine the havoc that those tell-tale red lines wreak. "Nitin used to sit in a corner and cry over his report card," recalls Ketki Dalai, a Dadar housewife whose son regularly came home with single-digit marks in Maths and languages through school. "I used to spend sleepless nights. The entire family dreaded the exam results. Nitin became so shy and underconfident, he stopped mixing with friends, expressing opinions or even choosing what to wear."

Tests eventually revealed that Nitin had dyslexia. But although the label was available, solutions were not—and the boy had no option but to sweat his way through a rigid school system. "Given the huge classrooms and stress on written exams, there was not much teachers could do to help," says Ms Dalai, who battled the SSC board and ensured that her son was allowed a writer. "When Nitin passed with 67 per cent, for me it was better than any 90 per cent."

Rather than collapsing with relief, however, the Dalals had to gird themselves for the next decision. Like Nitin, many slow learners and children with learning disabilities do tackle the



DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT ABILITIES

Std X exam either through normal or remedial schools. But after that, what?

Over the last eight months, a Matunga-based experiment has been trying to provide answers. Set up by ChildReach, an organisation working with troubled learners since 1987, the centre steers students towards the Std XII exam. Rather than the HSC, it has opted for the flexi-

ble National Open School syllabus, which allows Nitin and his classmates to choose subjects.

"The centre was born to meet a distinct need," says Rina Navalkar of ChildReach, adding that it soon hopes to expand from five to about 30 students. "After passing SSC or ICSE, some children are pushed into junior colleges where they get completely lost. Others enrol in crowded coaching classes. Attempts are rarely made to provide extra inputs or a supportive environment." Adds Sushmita Chattopadhyay, a teacher at the centre, "These children are always lagging behind, hovering at the periphery."

Children with learning disabilities tend to confuse spellings, jumble figures or experience trouble while reading. Slow learners are those who reach their academic milestones late—still muddling over 34/13 while their classmates have progressed to calculus. "They don't have any obvious disabilities so parents think they are lazy and indifferent," says Navalkar, adding that over the years ChildReach has conducted workshops, initiated a parent-support group and established a remedial school in Santa Cruz

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Learning disabilities