

Azim Premji University

LearnIng CURVe

RNI No.: KARENG/2018/76591

An Azim Premji University Publication

ISSN No.: 2582-1644



Nurturing Wellbeing in School Part 1

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Cover Photo

Azim Premji School, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh

Cover Photo Credit

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Design

Banyan Tree
+91 98458 64765

Printing

Repromen, Bengaluru 560071
+ 91 99452 43136
www.repromen.com

Learning Curve is a publication on education from the Azim Premji University for teachers, teacher educators, school heads, educational functionaries, parents and NGOs on contextual and thematic issues that have enduring relevance and value for them. It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives and stories of innovation; and encourages new, informed positions and thought-provoking points of view. The approach is a balance between an academic- and a practitioner-oriented magazine.

All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Azim Premji University.

FROM THE EDITOR



One of the most important things COVID-19 has taught us - and it has taught us a lot - about ourselves is that we are undoubtedly dependent on each other for our happiness, growth and thriving. It has also challenged our notions of success by bringing out the fact that it is not merely academic excellence or gaining marks that matter; success is being the best version of ourselves that we can be. The way to do this is by accentuating wellbeing, not just physical health, but mental and emotional prosperity too.

To achieve this, teachers and parents have to start early. Research has revealed that one of the most critical periods of a child's learning is between birth to 8 years and the experiences a child has during these years are as significant as anything is ever going to be. So, apart from the 'teaching' that goes on in the classroom, there is another component that has come to be known as emotional intelligence, which means acknowledging, first, one's own emotions followed by the emotions of others. How to learn to acknowledge them is the tricky part which educators are today finding ways to answer.

A term that is very much in the minds of educators today is socio-emotional learning (SEL) which has become an integral part of learning. Schools have 'Happiness Curriculums', to develop self-awareness, enable effective communication, to work collaboratively towards collective goals instead of individual ones, to bring equity to the learning process by becoming inclusive and empathetic. Teachers are looking at children as citizens who need to take their place in the larger social setting and learn to contribute to society while themselves leading meaningful and mindful lives. SEL also supports school-parents-community relationships by taking note of the unique culture of each family and region. This welcome shift from what was once merely academic curriculum and exams has immeasurably enriched classroom exchanges and made school a place where equity and excellence are equally valued by cutting across the separatist lines

of class, religion, language and family income, to name a few.

The articles in this issue richly demonstrate all this - we have a diverse range from across the country, brimming with enthusiasm and experiences that showcase the measures taken to make sure that children - and parents - view school as a place where they are encouraged to develop their skills and learn new ways of handling themselves (self-awareness) while giving others the space to grow and express themselves (empathy).

Preparing teachers to nurture wellbeing of their students is the subject of an article which brings out the importance of the teacher in this process while acknowledging that training is required to make this shift. Another article outlines the beginnings of this process in the Azim Premji Foundation schools. Yet another emphasises the importance and significance of actively making wellbeing part of a school's daily programme, in the same way that timetables routinely include maths or science. An account of the *Sadbhavna* School Programme of Chhattisgarh brings into focus the import of equity and non-discrimination in actual practice.

There are accounts of classroom experiences as well. Encouraging 'safe' along with 'brave' spaces in the classroom, where children feel confident and secure enough to speak about distressing issues in their lives, thereby opening the way to healing and wellbeing, is the subject of another article. We would like teachers who read these articles to feel that they can replicate the suggestions or supplement their already enriched programmes in their own classrooms.

As always, we welcome your responses, suggestions and ideas. Please email them to the id given below.

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Students spend a substantial amount of time at school and their school experience impacts their lives. On the face of it, schools are in a unique position to influence a sense of wellbeing and promote social-emotional learning. Herein lies the responsibility of schools as institutions that build a culture that nurtures children and ensures their wellbeing from a very young age. As mentioned by Schein,¹ culture is something that gets established over a period where people learn to bond, earn each other's trust, learn to solve problems, and resolve conflict. Schools may thus be seen as spaces where all stakeholders work together to establish this culture, and this has become a need that has been particularly felt during the pandemic.

Wellbeing, in simple terms, may be seen as a combination of feeling good and functioning well; experiencing positive emotions and relationships; developing one's potential with a sense of purpose. It is about the coming together of the 'mind' and the 'heart'. We feel from the way we think, and how the mind imagines a situation to be. The phrase *Cogito, ergo sum*, (Latin) coined by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650), translates as 'I think, therefore, I am'. Much of Descartes' philosophical thinking led him to speculate about the connection between the mind and the body. Is wellbeing, then, merely a state of mind? Should one examine it rationally or with empathy? Are rationality and emotionality two sides of the same coin or do they function irrespective of each other? However, if what we think and imagine has an impact on the physical body, feelings, and behaviour, then wellbeing may be seen as the coming together of our physical, mental, and emotional selves.

The experiences shared in this article are meant to facilitate substantive thinking about specific questions. For instance, can one show that along with family support (for decent living conditions, housing, and nutritious food), school support constitutes necessary basics for 'feeling well' among children? Or how demonstrably does a sense of wellbeing come from how one is treated

by near and dear ones, by friends, and at school?

The article focuses on the experience of building a culture that promotes wellbeing while setting up the Azim Premji Schools. Given that the Foundation schools do not tolerate corporal punishment, do not depend on external factors to bring about discipline, and do not promote rote learning and other such factors commonly associated with school life, Descartes' dictum – reflecting on the complex relationship between mind and body – provides us with an appropriate starting point for this narrative.

School culture

'Culture is deeply ingrained in a school, and therefore may only be altered over a longer period through systematic change in a school's climate'². '...School culture is defined as the shared values, rules, belief patterns, teaching and learning approaches, behaviours, and relationships among or across the individuals in a school.'³ It often operates beneath the surface and encompasses a school's norms, unwritten rules, traditions, and implied expectations.

Among the many things that were required in setting up the Azim Premji Schools, creating a space where children felt safe and happy was a priority. A pleasant environment, it was thought, would serve as the foundation for rich teaching and learning experiences, teacher accountability, lively parent-teacher conferences, and healthy relationships among all. This is because expectations affect almost everything. For example, being happy means looking forward to coming to school. This served the overall purpose and intent and necessitated the fostering of a sense of belonging and ownership among all the stakeholders - teachers, students, and parents alike.

A school's culture was seen as a living, evolving process that depended more on needs and circumstances than on any one individual or a set of written regulations. It was also believed that every process and event in the course would undoubtedly serve as the cornerstone for beliefs and values,

which would then be used to build perceptions for a school environment that would guide actions and behaviour.

As mentioned by Kent Peterson and Terrence Deal, 'Beneath the surface of everyday life in schools is an underground river of feelings, folkways, norms, and values that influence how people go about their daily work. This taken-for-granted set of expectations affects how people think, feel, and act'.⁴ Since the schools had just started, none of these aspects was a given. To foster a supportive, enabling environment and develop a 'feel' for their school, everyone had to work collectively.

Creating a school culture

'Schools are seen as places where teaching and learning take place, where knowledge is transmitted, where children can learn about other people, history, and diverse social issues.'⁵ Education must encourage social sensibility as well as self-awareness. Schools are therefore more than just a physical space. The creation of a *school community* that learns and collaborates in an environment characterised by the ideals of equality, social justice, and respect for everyone has been a key objective of the Azim Premji Schools. Thus, it was believed that all stakeholders should participate in the management of the schools through a process of communication and collaboration to promote a sense of community and ownership.

Role of dialogue

Dialogue is an introspective and sharing process that allows differing viewpoints to be held side-by-side. Dialogues among all stakeholders, relationship building, conflict resolution at all levels – within groups or between individuals – and having a forum to sort things out were viewed as critical to establishing an enabling culture and a way with education, that is, a means of educating and equipping individuals to be able to value and engage in dialogues. Spaces such as morning assemblies, meetings, classrooms and playgrounds were used for dialogue and to share views. For instance, assemblies were not just meant for prayers, sharing news, and other regular school-related rituals. Morning assembly was viewed more as a forum for fostering conversations. Both adults and children were encouraged to share their opinions and talk about topics that interested them. Children's performances were an outcome of classroom learning, not specifically planned items for the assembly. They were a means of letting

children know that their opinions were heard and that they could contribute. On the playground, winning and losing were considered part of the game and discussions revolved not just around the game, but around what children felt and how they behaved (particularly in the case of any aggression witnessed during the game).

Over time, children developed confidence in speaking during discussions, engaging in conversations with teachers or people less familiar, and sharing their issues. This was also a way of ensuring that children were equipped with making informed choices. Teachers at one of the schools believed it was critical to build students' awareness of social issues. So, they included conversations during assemblies and in the classroom on various topics including the persistent problem of child marriage in the area. Eventually, one of the students was able to resist the social pressure of marriage, demonstrating that dialogue is an effective method to ensure everyone's wellbeing—both individually and collectively.

Working with stakeholders

Engaging with parents

Given the kind of clientele the schools cater to, Parent Teacher Meetings (PTMs) had to be thoughtfully planned. Teachers were encouraged to understand the parents' and community's perspectives while communicating the school's perspectives. To make sure parents looked forward to coming to the PTMs, the focus was not to make it a complaint forum. Instead, it was a space to exchange ideas, celebrate the child's success and ensure that teachers and parents work together towards the wellbeing and performance of the child.

Teachers were also required to maintain a record of each child's work and make it available to parents. The bottom line – parents have a right to know about their child and it is the teacher's duty to provide all facts with evidence. Parents were expected to engage and be interested in their child's learning, set a work routine for children to study but not necessarily teach them. Respect and trust were thus mutual.

Parents' concerns were addressed in an amicable way. If teachers felt certain concerns to be beyond their capacity to deal with, they could share these with their colleagues and the management. Perspective-building was part of the meeting agenda, with discussions on matters like why rote

learning is discouraged, the school's vision, and other broader, general aims of education. One remembers at one of the first PTMs, in one of the schools a parent saying, 'You do what you have come here to do, and you have all our support, madam.'

Working with children

Children who enrolled at the school were from the local community; they were accustomed to the regular ways in which the local schools operated; where hierarchy, incentives, punishments, and tests are the norm. Children, for instance, were accustomed to continual teacher supervision and reprimands for mistakes. They were unsure of how to behave when given the chance to engage in 'free play' or autonomous learning in the classroom (such as reading independently or selecting captivating picture books). With their new school being a 'no punishment' space, children often went 'berserk' and got aggressive when left to themselves. What really helped here was a continuous dialogue with the children.

Teachers engaged in conversations with children by listening to both sides of an argument. A teacher had to be an active listener and observer; non-interfering, fair and non-judgmental. Without a doubt, this was challenging for the teachers and against their usual line of thinking. There was thus, a need to examine routine ways of working with children. Slowly, teachers started encouraging children to solve their problems and not prescribe solutions. They showed them alternative ways of engaging with friends and discussed ways of dealing with anger or being upset about losing a game on the playground, feeling frustrated with schoolwork, with a classmate or, at times, with a situation at home.

The changes were pleasantly surprising; within a month, children began to settle down, make their own board games, play with things that were readily available, and gradually discovered ways to be useful and productive when left alone during free time/unsupervised time, that is, in the absence of any formal instruction or organised activities by teachers.

Reflecting with teachers

While teachers were new to the organisation, they were not new to the profession. They came in with their own set of beliefs and values, be it about education, children, or themselves as teachers, the idea of discipline or aspects like examinations.

Teacher wellbeing and values are critical for any student wellbeing effort. There was a need for teachers to feel valued, to have a voice and be involved in the decision-making that impacted their work. Teachers were respected and acknowledged for their experience and expertise. For their part, teachers had to understand the value of having a good rapport with their pupils and the need to take time to get to know them. They had to comprehend how crucial a role they played in creating a culture of trust.

Processes and systems were put in place to ensure that quality time was spent with teachers to develop a sense of ownership for the school. Dialogues and conversations were considered 'the way forward' to understand each other and to iron out differences. Staff meetings, being one such forum, were held almost daily during the initial days of setting up the schools. It was a time for everyone to come together, exchange notes on the day's work, share concerns, celebrate achievements, and discuss challenges related to administration, Mid-Day-Meals (MDM) or the classroom.

Meetings were also a forum to build perspectives, discuss practices related to classroom teaching, school processes and resolve conflicts. It became a space that was used to understand the meaning of going beyond textbooks for teaching, why children's pace of learning need not be the same, whether uniformity mattered, understand that classroom management was about managing one's own emotions and behaviour and so on.

Larger aspects, like aims of education, curriculum or aligning practice with the vision of the organisation, were taken up during formal teacher professional development sessions, although not restricted to that. Agendas for staff meetings were not rigid - people could bring up their points. Essentially, staff meetings were a space where everyone was required to examine their own expectations as teachers if they were to bring about a new school culture. The idea was to have a shared understanding of all matters.

Teacher professional development

Professional development programmes were designed based on the vision of the Foundation and teachers' needs. Teacher professional development was planned with the belief that it had to be a process which calls for continuous and consistent engagement. An annual event was held in different school locations each year, where teachers from all the schools came together. This provided an

opportunity for teachers to travel to different locations and see how the other schools of the Foundation functioned. Teachers came together to share their views and practices, collaborate and learn from one another – the central idea was to promote comradeship among the teachers at the Foundation schools.

School committees

Various committees, like Admission, MDM, Library, Safety and Security, Activities and Celebrations and Assembly were formed. Teachers were appointed to these committees on a rotational basis to ensure that everyone was involved in all the school processes; to get a positive feel of the school and to collectively build the institutional culture.

Students too were part of some committees, for instance, as part of the Library Committee, they helped with the maintenance of books, the process of borrowing and lending of books; or as part of the MDM committee, they helped in serving, clearing up and ensuring that food was not wasted. Participation in school processes gave students the opportunity to understand how their school was run, encouraged them to accept responsibilities, learn about the expectations from them about responsible behaviour and how they can help

maintain healthy relationships.

Conclusion

The above account represents the experiences of the initial years of the Foundation schools. As with most organisations in their nascent stage, there were challenges while setting up the schools, with resources and facilities (most schools at the time functioned from rented spaces), establishing processes and working with teachers who came from diverse backgrounds. The experiences of the early years of these schools emphasise the importance of focusing on creating a motivating and supportive school culture that promotes the wellbeing of all, resulting in improved overall performance. It is also apparent that everyone involved in schools needs to come together to have a shared vision of creating a culture of wellbeing. For children to learn, achieve and thrive, they must be in a state of readiness, with their basic needs met. They must feel safe, valued, and believe in themselves. They require positive role models around them, from which stems the need to ensure the wellbeing and dignity of the teachers, resulting in the formation of the core elements of a culture that can contribute to a shared vision, values, and beliefs.

Endnotes

- i Edgar Schein's Model of Organisational Culture
- ii Gruenert, (2008) in School Climate and Culture, Strategy Brief, February 2016, Elisabeth Kane, Natalie Hoff, Ana Cathcart, Allie Heifner, Shir Palmon, Reece L. Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. p 1
- iii Çakiroğlu, Ü., Akkan, Y., & Güven, B. (2012) in School climate and Culture - Elisabeth Kane *et al. ibid.* p 1
- iv Kent Petersen and Terence Deal (2002)- The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook, The Jossey-Bass Education Series, Wiley Company. p 9
- v Why School Is Important. <https://www.waterburybridgetosuccess.org/why-is-school-important/>



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In Pursuit of Happiness at School

Jwairia Saleem

The pursuit of happiness has been an age-old quest and an elusive one at that. Everyone desires it, though it means different things to different people. Because of its subjective nature, the agency for being happy often remains with the individual. So why and when did such a subjective concept become the object of global and national concern to be fostered in schools?

Evolution of school-based wellbeing programmes

In 1986, in response to rising socio-emotional problems among young people, the Ottawa Charterⁱ extended the concept of 'health' to include physical, social and mental wellbeing, and urged other sectors to share the responsibility of promoting it. The 'Global Mental Health Initiative' (WHO, 1995) recommended schools take charge of fostering socio-emotional wellbeing. Since then, several policy documents were released, directing schools to develop life skills, psycho-social competencies and provide better identification and early intervention to students with mental health issues. Thus began the global movement for implementing a host of school-based mental health programmes ranging from mental health and wellbeing to child safety and safeguarding.

Status of wellbeing programmes in schools

The Indian education ecosystem has also been abuzz with discourses around mental health, wellness, and wellbeing. Various programmes for life skills, socio-emotional learning, adolescent development, value education, yoga, mindfulness, meditation and happiness have been introduced to promote wellbeing in school. Post-COVID-19, programmes like *Manodarpan* and *SAHYOG* were launched to support children and youth in dealing with emotional crises.

While these efforts are commendable, they have been sporadic and piecemeal – usually adopting a top-up approach by devoting some time to conducting activities during or after school. A vast majority of the teaching fraternity perceives these as 'additional' to their primary responsibility of

teaching the core curriculum. The general lack of an understanding of what wellbeing is and why it is important obfuscates the intent and impact that these programmes could have.

Understanding wellbeing

'Wellbeing' is often interchanged with many other terms like wellness, happiness, welfare, or quality of life. There has been no universally-accepted definition, thus far. A synthesis of commonly-used definitionsⁱⁱ implies that wellbeing includes:

- Physical health and fitness
- Mental, social and emotional health that comes with trusting relationships and belief in a just world
- General contentment with life that comes from self-belief and achievement of goals
- A sense of purpose in life that makes living worthwhile

Wellbeing, therefore, is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing the physical, mental, socio-emotional, intellectual, as well as the societal aspect of an individual's being, often seen as being part of good health. It has both a subjective and an objective dimension as well – while individuals may differ in their life's purpose or what makes them happy (the subjective element), a good life and life experiences as per social norms and values are much the same for everyone (the objective element).

Importance of wellbeing at school

The growing years spent at school are most critical for developing a worldview and a belief system that determines the attitudes and behaviour that children will eventually bring to adult life. With the universalisation of education, schools are uniquely positioned to 'catch them young' and meet children's physical and socio-emotional needs, predisposing them to experiencing positive emotions. In a stratified and diverse society like ours, this means that all children irrespective of their circumstances, can experience wellbeing and have a fair chance at life.

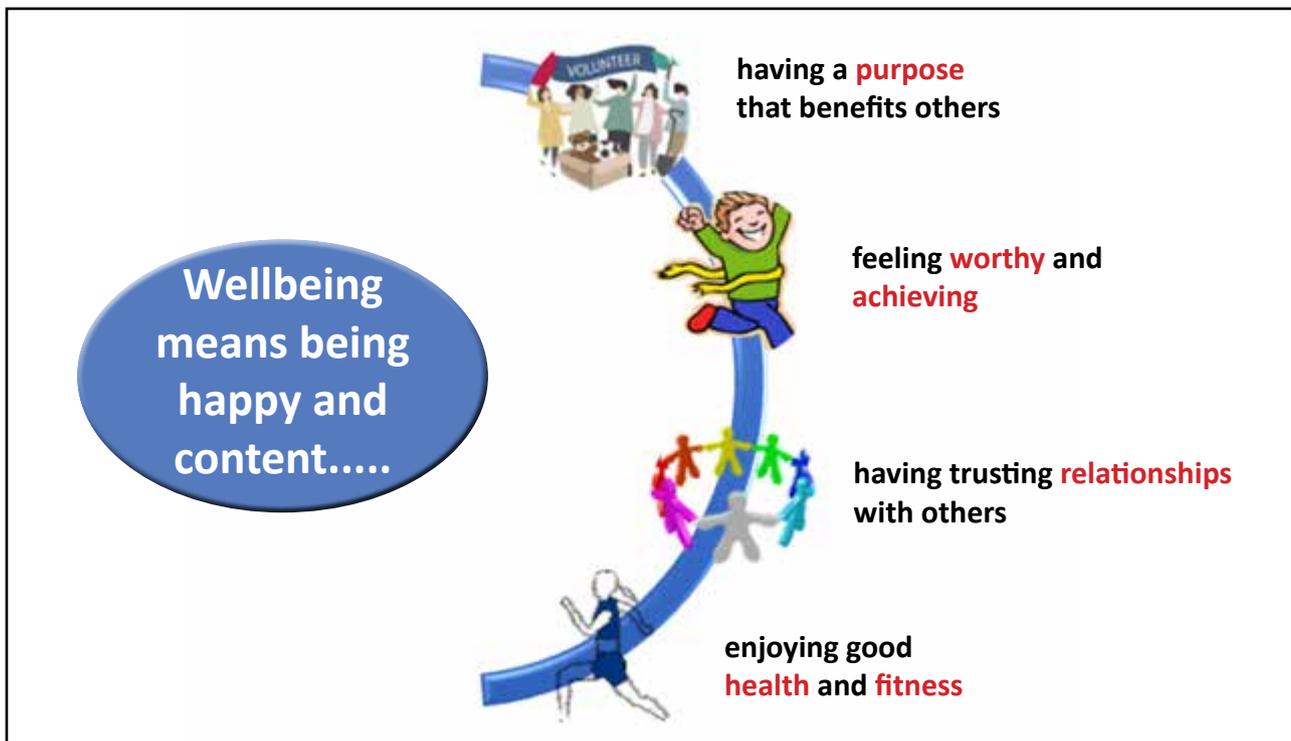


Figure 1. Multi-dimensional constructs of wellbeing

Feeling respected and cared for and being heard and responded to makes children feel worthy. Their self-worth leads them to believe in themselves, gives them the courage to articulate their thoughts, share their emotions and explore the environment without fear or inhibition. It also builds children's faith in the goodness of people and the world, helping them form healthy relationships with others. A belief in self and the world allows them to rationalise a mishap as a probable event in life rather than blame oneself or others for the 'unjust and unfair' treatment meted out to them. They do not question 'why me?', when a tragedy befalls them, but show resilience and fortitude in the face of misfortune.

Research by Kamble and Dalbert on wellbeing in Indian schools has shown how teachers' good treatment of children leads to a strong belief in a just world (BJW) and greatly contributes to their wellbeing at school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Understanding the impact of a safe school environment has far-reaching implications for educators. Since wellbeing can be neither 'taught' nor 'caught' through specific activities, but only developed through enriching learning experiences in a safe community, the role of educators is to

create such an environment, build relationships, and provide ample opportunities for the development of intellectual opportunities so children can experience their *aha* moments to do what they can do best, and be who they can become.

Approaches to wellbeing at school

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that the purpose of school has always been to develop the child holistically - mind, body, and soul. Furthermore, the readiness to learn is built only when children feel physically safe, emotionally secure, and socially comfortable (Maslow). So, the integration of wellbeing is subsumed in both, the aims of education and the purpose of school.

That said, the whole-school approach to wellbeing focuses on creating a safe environment, nurturing relationships, and stimulating learning experiences that predispose all children to experience wellbeing. It also prevents, to a great extent, at-risk children from developing illnesses or maladjustive behaviour.

However, a child-centred approach is needed to identify and provide early intervention to children who may show signs of mental or psychosocial behavioural problems. Teachers must therefore be equipped with skills to identify issues, provide necessary interventions within the school, and collaborate with other professionals to make

MASLOW'S Hierarchy of Needs

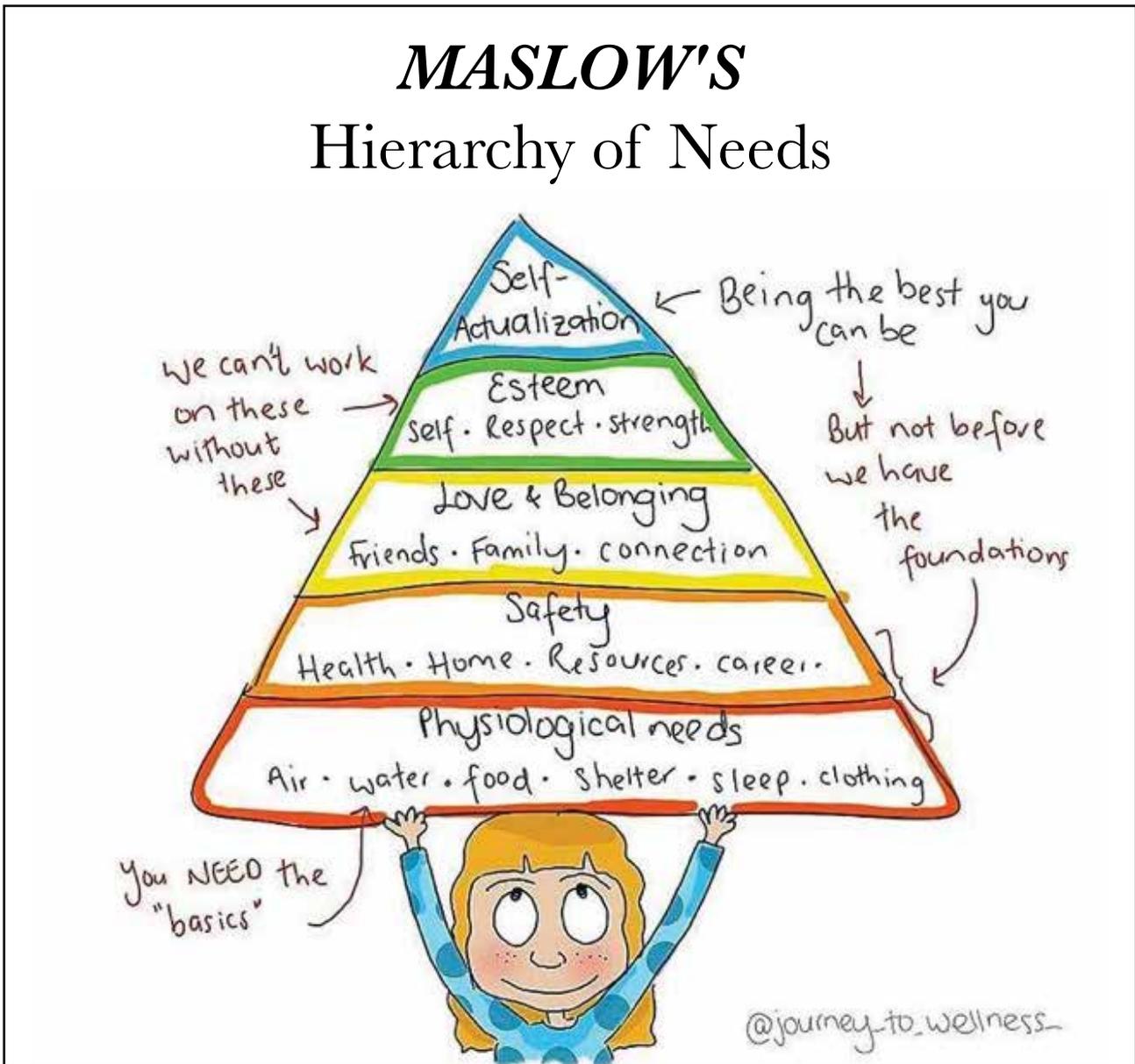


Figure 2. Maslow's Theory of Self-actualisation and Hierarchy of Needs

informed decisions about the best possible support to help develop a child's full potential. Continuous professional development for teachers on differentiation strategies as well as designing and implementing individualised plans with accommodations and modifications as per a child's need becomes critically important.

Schools must, therefore, use both the whole-school and the child-centred approach, so that *all* children benefit from the interventions provided at different levels.^{iv}

Challenges in implementation

One of the biggest challenges school leaders and teachers face in creating a safe and inclusive culture is resistance from stakeholders - sometimes

even students refuse to treat others in their class as equals. Socio-economic, cultural, and religious differences find their way into classrooms, threatening the school environment. A genuine belief in justice and equity can inspire teachers to make conscious and collective efforts to weed out discriminatory practices and ensure fairness.

The second challenge comes from our ideas about *discipline* that can make or mar our relationships with students. Teachers assume that being approachable and friendly diminishes their authority. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Teachers who are humble, compassionate and make efforts to connect with their students are seen as trustworthy

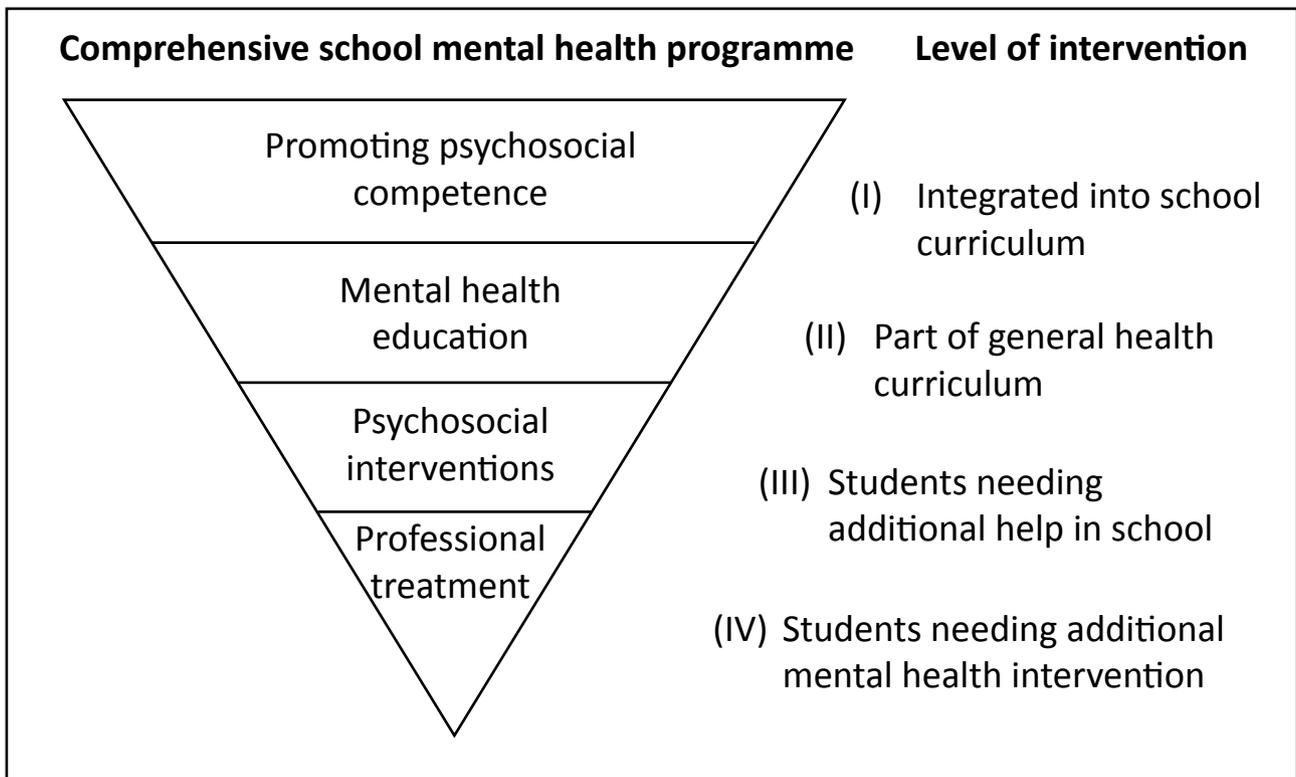


Figure 3. The four levels of intervention at school (WHO)

and held in high esteem. Similarly, the system of rewarding or punishing students' work or behaviour is undesirable. While punishments are obviously harmful to children's self-esteem, rewards can make children focus on success rather than on learning. Teachers must work on creating a love for learning, encourage children to engage in challenging tasks and learn from their mistakes by appreciating efforts rather than results.

The road to wellbeing

The first step on the road to wellbeing is to transform the school ecosystem; this requires principles of change management to be applied. It takes a great deal of patience, time, and sincere devotion to engage with students continuously, and consistently to get their buy-in to the idea of change. But once they are on board, the school-transformation process gains momentum and is collaboratively led to fruition.

Recommendations

For head teachers

1. Discuss with teachers, students, and parents the changes you wish to bring and why; create a shared vision for the school.

2. Share responsibilities with teachers (parents and students too) based on their interests and ability.
3. Appreciate efforts in public and advise in private.
4. Be visible to students: talk to them before assembly, after school and during midday meals.
5. Share, borrow or use community resources.

For teachers

1. Connect and make children feel valued (during rollcall/ break/before or after class) by:
 - Addressing them by name
 - Making eye contact
 - Smiling often
 - Showing a genuine interest in their lives
 - Treating everyone in the same way
2. Help children make and sustain friendships by:
 - Co-developing and setting behaviour expectations
 - Creating a time and a place for discussing feelings
 - Guiding them to resolve conflicts amicably
3. Provide opportunities for deep thinking and metacognition by:
 - Asking probing questions and giving wait time
 - Asking for their views and opinions
 - Offering choices in everyday class/homework

4. Develop health consciousness
 - Encourage healthy eating and physical activity
 - Integrate health topics in class projects
5. Develop compassion and empathy
 - Design lessons around community issues
 - Plan events around community and social service

In pursuit of happiness: a success story

Studies in wellbeing make a distinction between happiness and pleasure. What we construe as happiness is often momentary and does not last long. True long-lasting happiness, studies posit, comes from a deep joy that one gets from being inspired by a purpose that makes a difference to others.

*When you do things from your soul
You feel a river of joy within you*
- Rumi

My fascination with the idea of teaching ‘purpose’ to achieve wellbeing led to the development of the ‘Framework for Teaching Purpose’ which I put to the test at The Indian Academy, Dubai during my tenure there as Principal. Underpinning the framework is the premise that every individual has a natural affinity to do good and find deep and long-lasting joy in accomplishing a task that is of some

benefit to others. We initiated a ‘Buy a Blessing’ programme in which the teachers’ tasks were to facilitate brainstorming to generate inspirational ideas, guide children in checking for feasibility, support them in planning the project and finally coordinate its execution. The children surpassed our expectations by creating projects, such as an organic garden, a zero-budget studio, a lemonade stall, and a piezoelectric jogging mat, each of which had a business plan and a brochure that advertised their products. All the products were then put on sale at a ‘Buy a Blessing’ stall, as the proceeds were to go to various charities. In the first year, the students chose to fund a school for the blind, an old-age home, the Blue Cross, and a centre for autism. ‘Buy a Blessing’ featured as a successful innovation and entrepreneurship project in the news and was later adopted in a few other schools. Around the same time, a Happiness Meter (Fig.4 B) was placed in all classrooms, with a range of emotions displayed on a vertical board. Children were given pegs with their names on them. Every morning, during circle time, children would reflect on how they were feeling and place the peg on the emotion they identified with. Children could, by choice, talk about why they felt the way they did, and others could provide them with suggestions or comments. The teacher took this opportunity

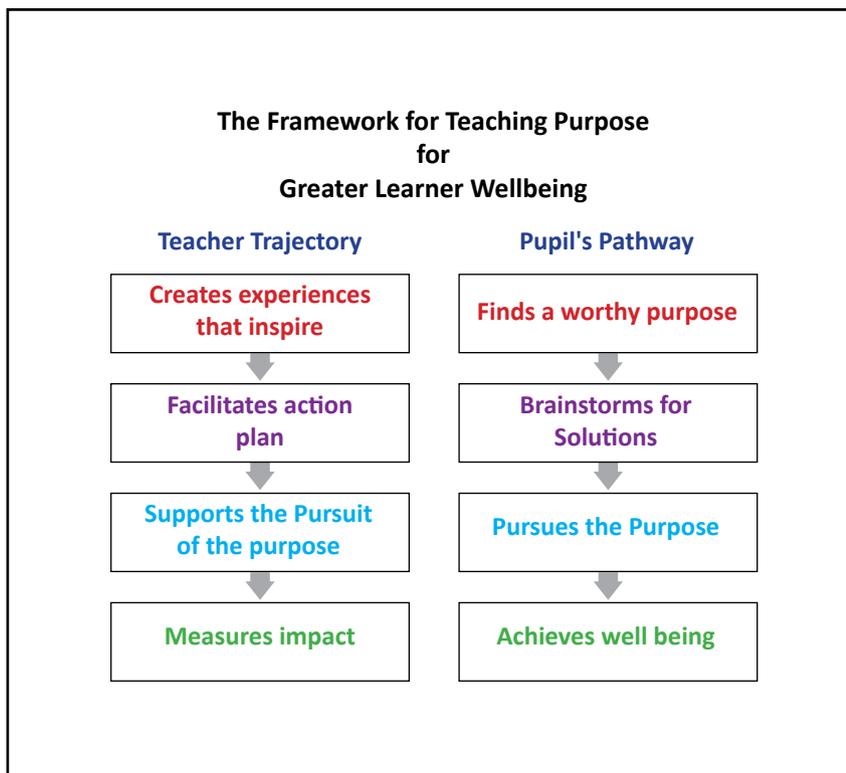


Figure 4A. The Purpose Framework



Figure 4B. Happiness Meter

to probe if anyone had a negative emotion and suggest ways of coping with it. In higher classes, suggestive coping mechanisms were included in the Happiness Meter and circle time was in smaller groups giving students an option to create their own 'safety nets'.

The Happiness Meter served more than the purpose for which it was designed – to create self-awareness and emotional regulation among students. Besides creating a safe environment for student-teacher conversations, it deepened the teachers' understanding of their students, thereby enabling them to support student learning to a greater degree. Over a period of six months,

disciplinary issues and the number of cases referred to the school counsellor were greatly reduced as more and more teachers began to resolve these issues in class themselves. Another heart-warming development was the improved management of learners with disabilities; teachers showed a better understanding of group dynamics and were more positive and supportive in making the 'buddy system' work well.

The data from the wellbeing survey conducted before and after the purpose framework showed a significant increase in levels of wellbeing, with the highest increase seen in primary school.

Endnotes

- i The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion is the name of an international agreement signed at the First International Conference on Health Promotion, organised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and held in Ottawa, Canada, in November 1986.
- ii Definitions by: Oxford and Cambridge dictionary, The Berkley Institute of wellbeing, Allardt's well-being model (1989) The PERMA model (Seligman 2000) Laura King (Health and Wellness Coach), Gemma Simons (2021)
- iii *ibid*
- iv Hendren, Weisen and Orley, Mental Health Programmes in Schools, WHO, 1994



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Preparing Teachers to Nurture Wellbeing of Children

Rajashree Srinivasan

Educational practice in a society is an endeavour directed at the wellbeing of young children. John White (2011) in his book *Exploring Wellbeing in Schools*, observes that as an educational aim, school education should equip every child to lead a life that is personally flourishing and help others to do so, too. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 states, ‘...seeking guidance from the constitutional vision of India... certain broad aims of education have been identified in this document. These include the independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others’ wellbeing and feelings, learning to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner, predisposition towards participation in democratic processes, and the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change’ (NCF Document, p.vii).

In these articulations, wellbeing moves beyond the description of its construct as an individual accomplishment or experience. It becomes an amorphous amalgamation of good health, psychosocial competencies and ethical sensibilities that acquires its specific meaning in the contexts of the society in which the educational practice is carried out. Children’s wellbeing, both as a process and an experience, is influenced by, and in turn, influences the ecologies of development such as the family, peers, schools, and the socio-political, economic, historical, cultural and policy contexts. Wellbeing in educational settings rests on the quality of relationships and responses to interpersonal needs, interests, capabilities and challenges. It is not an inherent capacity or a personal characteristic of the child. It emerges in the process of development across childhood and adolescence, influencing their futures as well. That is, children’s perceptions about their wellbeing emerge from a negotiation with the environment over time and place. Therefore, the supportive relationships they experience in their social settings during childhood matter to their wellbeing.

Schooling, teaching and wellbeing

Schooling provides an environment for expanding a child’s capacities in multiple areas essential for their

wellbeing – the capacity to engage in understanding and reasoning, academic knowledge, socio-emotional and moral development (including forming engaging and worthwhile relationships and activities with others) and participation in the processes of democratic citizenship. Schools, therefore, have the task of ensuring a learning environment imbued with empathy, dignity, respect, autonomy, and plentiful opportunities for self-expression, among others. An education aimed towards such a contextualised understanding of wellbeing encompasses notions of justice and care as its building blocks. Justice and care are essential ingredients of inclusive schooling, and foundational to the notion of teaching as a ‘relational practice’.

Critical classroom practices of social justice are premised on the notion that all children in the classroom deserve fair and equitable rights, opportunities and access to resources. Social justice practices aimed at humanising the classrooms help students embrace their own identities, avoid bias and respect people from different backgrounds. Social justice-based approaches include a focus on differences rather than on deficits among children; build on culturally relevant previous knowledge; create a classroom culture of relational trust and empathy; help students question injustice where prevalent; nurture children’s commitment to their communities and towards civic engagement.

Central to good teaching is caring. Care is not a woolly or a feel-good construct. It refers to a relational quality that shows an active concern for the wellbeing of others. It is more than the formation of interpersonal relationships between the child and the teacher. It includes the ability to sustain connections, and the commitment to respond to children with sensitivity and flexibility. Caring practices are visible in a variety of interactions that teachers and children engage in: planning age-appropriate lessons, engaging

students in classroom processes, providing safe spaces for expression, praising students, including children's perspectives in decision-making, setting boundaries both inside and outside classroom interactions, building classroom norms and rules together, listening to children's mental health needs, being there for them through their difficult times, challenging them with concepts and ideas, declining their requests, providing constructive feedback and so on.

However, such an articulation of a teacher's role in the wellbeing of children does not mean that ensuring the wellbeing of children is the sole responsibility of the teacher. School is a web of relationships, and wellbeing manifests at multiple levels in a school: intra-personal, interpersonal and institutional. Therefore, wellbeing is a key educational concern that all actors of the school have to pay attention to – head teachers, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents, as well. Given the central significance of wellbeing in the lives of children, it becomes important to pay attention to these aspects in teacher-preparation programmes too.

Pedagogy of teacher education and children's wellbeing

Pre-service teacher education programmes are the first point of contact for prospective teachers to develop capabilities in terms of their knowledge, skills and values. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) highlighting the vision of teacher preparation observes, 'Teachers need to be prepared to care for children, enjoy to be with them, seek knowledge, own responsibility towards society and work to build a better world, develop sensitivity to the problems of the learners, commitment to justice and zeal for social reconstruction' (NCFTE, p 20).

Role of student-teachers

Student-teachers need to be prepared to respond to the developmental needs and diversity in their classrooms. Challenges to the wellbeing of children can come from factors inside or outside the classroom. Children, especially those coming from difficult social and economic backgrounds, may experience conflicts, corporal punishment, violence, stigma and discrimination extensively. These events impact their educational outcomes in the classroom and thwart their emotional wellbeing. Student-teachers need to respond to these situations with sensitivity and flexibility.

Teacher education programmes can prepare

student-teachers to nurture enabling environments in their classrooms by: a) providing knowledge, skills and values to enact caring practices in their classrooms; b) preparing them with a range of specific pedagogical approaches so that they may create caring communities within the classroom and school spaces; c) fostering sensitivity to the socio-emotional needs of children. Outlined below are a few pedagogical approaches to achieving these goals. These approaches do not require separate time or space in the curriculum of teacher education. Teacher educators could integrate them into their teaching of theory- or practice-related courses.

Aspects of promoting wellbeing

The approaches outlined below include three components – first, the domain in which teachers need to be prepared; second, a rationale for including this domain and third, the possible curricular and pedagogic approach.

Tackling discrimination and prejudice

Children in government schools may experience discrimination emerging from differences in social class, gender, religion, caste, language, disability and sexual orientation. Discrimination is a human violation and undermines the social cohesion, educational success and wellbeing of children. Teachers need to be aware of the possible forms of direct and indirect discrimination in a classroom and the different sources of discrimination, such as their own attitudes, school rules, curriculum, pedagogic practices, teaching-learning materials and access to food and other infrastructure at school.

Teacher education (TE) programmes need to help student-teachers examine their assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes about a host of issues concerning childhood, socio-cultural backgrounds, learning, teaching and diversity. An inquiry into 'self, contexts and relationships' through an examination of their own identity markers of caste, class, religion, gender and abilities may develop their sensitivities and sensibilities about diversity and wellbeing. Discussions in pre-service teachers' classrooms can be about understanding who might be at risk for discrimination, the approaches to minimise discrimination, ways to support children at risk of discrimination, promoting inclusion and an appreciation of the benefits of diversity in schools and classrooms.

Preventing violence

Schools need to be sanctuaries of wellbeing, peace and inclusion. They have an obligation to protect children from violence. However, various forms of direct violence are inflicted on children by teachers and by other children in the form of hitting and bullying (including cyberbullying). Fear, corporal punishment and competition in the classrooms cause anxiety in children. Prospective teachers need to be educated to develop democratic and constructive approaches to creating safe and brave spaces for dialogue with children. They need to be taught various non-violent approaches to classroom discipline and communication. Student-teachers need to be prepared to listen to children with empathy.

Dealing with fake news and misinformation

Propaganda, misinformation and fake news can cause harm, intentional or unintentional. Within school spaces, it can polarise student opinion and undermine democratic ways of functioning. Sharing links, texts, videos, or images through a variety of digital medium allow information to go viral. Young children can be extremely vulnerable to misinformation and fake news. Sometimes, students also resort to social media to convey negative images about teachers, principals and their peers. This can cause a great strain on their physical and mental wellbeing. Prospective teachers need to be trained in media and digital literacy. This can include developing strategies to understand and assess information from different sources of media, critically evaluate information, make arguments, use evidence and learn to make interpretations within contexts. Pre-service teachers need to gather skills to also integrate this learning into the curriculum of various subjects.

Managing conflict

Since the caring work of teachers implies reciprocity in the relationship and a commitment to social and emotional connections, it brings with it relational tensions. Prospective teachers need to address sensitive and complex moral dilemmas and conflicts in the classroom or outside. Brushing them aside is harmful to the wellbeing of children and to themselves as well. Approaches such as peer mediation, restorative justice and conflict management can be taught to student-teachers during their programme. Such training in conflict

management helps them uncover their own biases and prejudices and offers them the courage to handle conflicts confidently in their classrooms. Participation in such methods of handling conflicts allows them to understand the work of teaching and their roles as teachers in ensuring the wellbeing of children. It helps them understand that conflicts are inherent to their everyday personal lives and to their professional work as teachers.

Addressing controversial issues

Schools are miniature societies and the challenges that afflict society are often reflected in the workings of the school. Children may feel troubled by the injustice and negative events that happen around them. Controversial issues may relate to experiences of poverty, terrorism, gender, caste or any other life events where questions of inequality and justice may be seen to have been challenged. These are usually highly emotive in nature and most children (and adults too) have challenges in discussing these rationally. These may emerge in the classrooms or sometimes teachers may have to raise them among children respectfully. Therefore, pre-service teachers need to have an understanding of handling controversial issues. Collaborative, reflective inquiry, and dialogue on these issues may help in developing multiple perspectives about these issues and nurture democratic capabilities, such as openness to others' beliefs and views, critical thinking, speaking respectfully, and adaptability to ambiguities and uncertainties. These encourage pre-service teachers to listen to each other and work out possibilities sensitively.

Examining their educational practice through the lens of social justice and care perspectives helps student-teachers understand that social realities are dynamic and fluid and that they need to be critically reflective about these on an everyday basis. Besides the approaches to conflict management mentioned above, cooperative learning approaches such as 'academic controversy' can also be introduced to prospective students to teach controversial issues. Such training also prepares them to protect students from vulnerable backgrounds to handle unexpected remarks and questions in constructive ways.

Listening to children

How children view themselves in relation to their life in school and its elements - the curriculum, child-teacher relationship, pedagogy practices, curricular and sports activities, playground, infrastructure, peer relationships – provides insights into how children perceive their wellbeing in school. Listening to children's perspectives must be the central, caring agenda for schools that seek to be inclusive. Therefore, it is imperative for pre-service teacher programmes to help student-teachers understand ways and methods of facilitating children's participation in discourses that concern their lives – on how to consult and involve children in the learning processes, on decision-making about school and classroom activities, and in encouraging them to express their views.

Developing an understanding of our Constitution and other legal rights of children

The Constitution of India represents a broad framework to protect citizens' rights and serves as a frame for the overall social, economic and political development of India. School practices ought to reflect the basic values of equality, equity, secularism, justice, liberty and fraternity enshrined in the Constitution and must encourage children and teachers to practice these values in their individual and social life. Knowledge and critical understanding of Constitutional values, fundamental duties and rights of children need to inform curricular and pedagogical action.

Pre-service teachers need to be educated about the Constitution, its values and approaches to connect them to their classroom practices. Having a knowledge of the Constitution and other legal rights of children also helps teachers deal with conflicts and controversial issues in the light of the Constitution. Constitution education will help pre-service teachers understand that the protection of children's dignity and respect is non-negotiable in assuring the wellbeing of children.

Opportunities for self-development

Teachers' own wellbeing is critical to children's wellbeing and to the formation of schools as caring communities. Caregiving professions, such as teaching, can be emotionally exhausting. Sustaining teaching needs high motivation, commitment

and autonomy. Teacher education programmes will need to equip student-teachers with not only knowledge about children's socio-emotional needs but also strategies for developing one's own social and emotional competencies. Experiencing art, music, dance and theatre promotes opportunities to understand self, strengthen relational capacities among adult students and enhances their physical and psychological wellbeing. For example, in the online classes during the pandemic, students (MA Education) who took my course, 'Teachers and Teaching' at the University, shared their art or sang a music piece, played an instrument or taught knitting, sketching, mandala art or yoga in the first fifteen minutes of a ninety-minute class. Most students turned their videos on during this brief session. In the feedback, the majority of the class shared that these aesthetic experiences provided great joy, strengthened emotional connectedness amongst their peers and offered opportunities to connect with their friends beyond academic learning spaces. Emerging from this experience, I continued this effort while teaching in the face-to-face mode and students expressed similar thoughts and feelings. While far deeper scrutiny of the process and outcomes are required to make any concrete formulations, adult students' views seem to indicate a positive proclivity towards these pathways of self-development and awareness.

Final observations

Teaching occurs at the interface of the socio-emotional and cultural worlds of children and the wider socio-political, historical and economic contexts. Gaining an understanding of both these worlds is essential to carry out the work of teaching. Learning to teach is a complex phenomenon. Becoming a teacher involves attuning oneself to children's ways of learning and knowing, and having a capacity for empathy for the socio-emotional lives of children. Student-teachers need to develop qualities of care, respect, empathy, warmth and sensitivity towards the social backgrounds of children as a professional requirement. A wide spectrum of experiences that includes reading and writing, questioning, teaching, dialogue, collaborative inquiry, self-development, reflection, introspection and creative expressions are imperative for developing socio-emotional

orientation and ethical sensibilities of the student-teachers towards children and schools. If these experiences can 'initiate' teachers into appreciating the educational aims of flourishing or wellbeing

and help them become critical actors in the school communities they join, it is a well-begun journey of possibilities towards self-renewal, life-long inquiry and learning.



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It is important to talk about emotions in the classroom and provide a space for expression. When children experience a new emotion, they want to share it but are generally not encouraged to do so. Such emotions, if left unexpressed, lead to negative social behaviours, like bullying. Creative art forms are fun to engage in and also create space for building trust.

Mahima Rastogi, Expressive Art Forms | Tools for Teachers, p 27

Suresh Sahu

Azim Premji Foundation in collaboration with the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Chhattisgarh has launched a *Sadbhavna* School Programme, which aims to encourage '*sadbhavna*' values in the classroom and school practices of the participating schools. The pilot programme has been implemented in 183 schools in 6 districts of Chhattisgarh.

A girl in a government high school in a small village in Chhattisgarh says that she feels sad that she cannot take her best friend, who is from the same village, to her home. She says, 'We sit together, study together and eat our lunch together in school.' However, unlike some of her other friends who belong to the same caste as hers, her best friend is not allowed in her home because she belongs to a so-called lower caste. Her mother, who is also educated up to higher secondary, teaches her to view everyone as equal, however, the rest of the family thinks otherwise, and as a result, she cannot take her best friend home. If the girls were not in school, would they have got the opportunity to know each other, be friends with each other, or think differently from their families about caste and the superiority and inferiority associated with it?

Schools have the potential to work as the place where children from different backgrounds come together and experience and appreciate for themselves their similarities and differences and be able to shake off the shackles of prejudices, discrimination and violence of different types that exist in society. The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 also guarantees all children the right to go to school, the right to be treated with love and care, and the right to be treated equally and with dignity. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, in its position paper on 'Aims of Education', envisages education to be a liberating process, where the process of education must free itself from the shackles of all kinds of exploitation and injustice (for example, poverty, gender discrimination, caste and communal biases).

However, news from across different parts of the country suggests that different kinds of exclusion, discrimination and unequal treatment are part of the daily routine of children in schools, in both subtle and crude forms. Here are some instances:

- Not participating in the mid-day meal (MDM) because of the caste of the cook or other such reasons
- Girls facing harassment both on their way to school and inside the school, resulting sometimes in their dropping out
- Teasing peers for their disabilities, physical appearance, their parents' profession, and their socio-economic status
- Small arguments leading to violent exchanges

Different forms of exclusion, discrimination, harassment, and violence are part of the daily life experience of many children, particularly those from socially marginalised groups.

Also, in the age of globalisation and technological advancements, along with many opportunities, new challenges have emerged. Cyberspace is one such area where children need to be equipped with abilities to protect themselves. A flood of wrong, hateful, biased information with technological advancements and penetration of social media warrants that children develop abilities to critically examine information and arrive at correct decisions.

Origin of *Sadbhavna* School Programme

Value education has been a broad umbrella under which concerns of equity and inclusion have been tried to be addressed in school education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates the aims of education as producing engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by the Constitution of India. Its guiding principles are ethics and human and Constitutional values, such as empathy, respect for others, cleanliness, courtesy, democratic spirit, respect for public property, scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, and justice. However,

value education/moral education is often taught as per a set curriculum in schools, mostly limited to a designated textbook. The school culture is often disconnected from what is taught in the value education class.

Education plays a significant role in creating a just, equitable, humane, and sustainable society. The role of education in developing people equipped with the abilities and dispositions to play their roles in such a society is of paramount importance along with the all-around development of an individual. There are a set of universally recognised values, such as dignity, freedom, justice, peace etc., which play a crucial role in determining and guiding human action as they are internalised structures that evoke a sense of right or wrong as also a sense of priorities. Values can be seen both at the individual level and at the community level.

Some schools in Chhattisgarh have come forward to live the constitutional values through all their school and classroom practices and implement the *Sadbhavna* School Programme.

Sadbhavna School Programme

The word *sadbhavna* means to have peace, harmony, unity, and integrity in society. Relationships based on respect, kindness, and cooperation towards each other are foundations for such a society. Since the school is seen as an institutional arrangement for facilitating and nurturing such dispositions and abilities, the school and classroom practices become the site where teachers and students work together to learn and live these values of a secular and democratic system ensuring unity and integrity of the nation as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India.

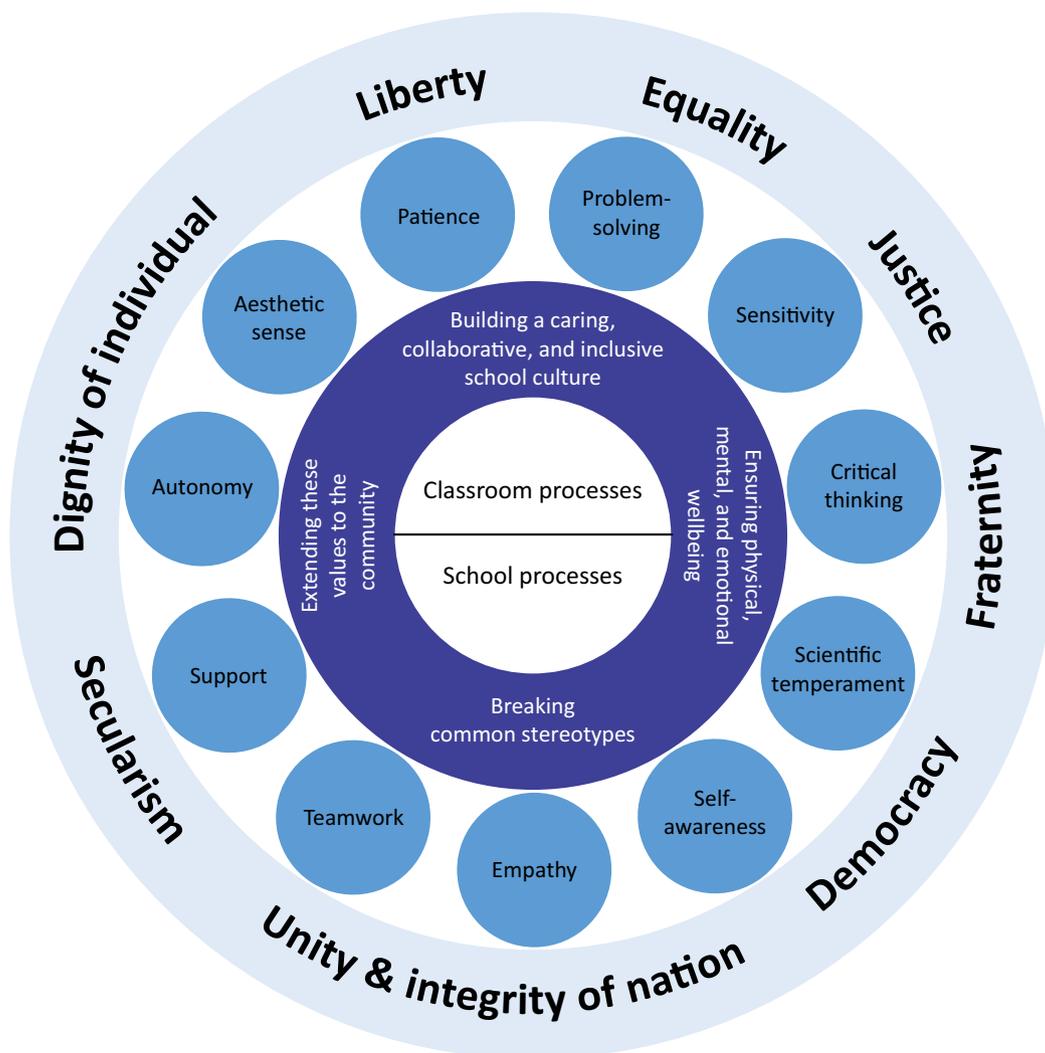


Figure 1. The framework of *Sadbhavna* School Programme

Guiding principles

Curricular integration and periodic self-assessment are two important components of the programme. Curricular integration is aimed at amalgamating the programme into everyday classroom activities, instead of running it as an isolated activity. The five guiding principles of the programme are:

1. *Practise rather than preach*

It is well-understood that values can be nurtured best by practising them. The focus of the programme, therefore, is not only on learning about these values but also practising them in all the interactions and activities of the school. A list of tangible practices relating to assembly, MDM, peer relationships of students, student-teacher relationships, classroom management etc., has been identified which the schools will aim to slowly make part of their school culture.

2. *Seamless integration into all school and classroom activities*

Any special programme tends to be limited to a special activity, curriculum, or event. To have any meaningful effect, the *Sadbhavna* School Programme will have to be seamlessly integrated into all the school and classroom activities, Curricular integration is one such strategy aimed at amalgamating the programme into everyday classroom activities, instead of running it as an isolated activity.

3. *Collaborative efforts of all stakeholders*

The school will have to work on the programme as a team and will have to regularly deliberate and build consensus to keep efforts aligned to objectives. Support from functionaries will also be very crucial for the success of this programme.

4. *Long-term commitment*

Developing something as part of an institution's culture takes time and it cannot be expected to happen immediately. It will need constant effort over a period of time.

5. *Regular self-assessment*

Periodic self-assessment will help the schools appreciate the achievements and identify the areas where they need to make more efforts.

Domains of work

Four domains to work on in the abilities and dispositions in everyday activities of the schools have been identified as:

1. Building a caring, collaborative, and inclusive school culture

2. Ensuring physical, mental, and emotional safety in schools
3. Breaking commonly-held stereotypes
4. Extending these values to the community

Domain 1. Building a caring, collaborative, and inclusive school culture

Both as a social and a learning process, learning happens best in an inclusive environment with cooperation and collaboration where everyone feels cared for and is exposed to diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. This also provides opportunities to work as a team and be able to appreciate and understand different contexts because students then learn how to articulate and defend their ideas and views. This gives students the opportunity to develop their own framework for building knowledge. Collaboration, communication, and flexibility are the three core skills of this domain.

Collaboration between students of different gender, caste, religion, academic and other abilities will give them the opportunities to know and be friends with each other. Such opportunities will not only help students learn better but will also help them develop skills for working in groups and teams.

Communication with sensitivity and empathy is an important skill that can enable children to communicate their feelings and thoughts with others and help them understand and know each other.

Flexibility is the ability to adapt to a diverse changing environment and context.

Some of the practices that schools have decided to encourage in their schools are:

- Develop a positive and collaborative classroom and school culture through various committees of students, student body participation in the formation of norms, planning of events, participation of community members in school management etc.
- Follow an impartial process of displaying the work of all the students and not just the 'best' ones.
- Cultivate a democratic and empathetic culture by celebrating festivals of all religions.
- To not practise any explicit or implicit form of discrimination in the school based on students' or teachers' caste, socio-economic class, gender, religion, food habits, ability, or intelligence.
- Maintain an active and engaged relationship with the community and caregivers/parents.

Domain 2. Ensuring physical, mental, and emotional safety in schools

An unsafe, abusive, discriminatory, and violent environment hinders the academic performance of children, it even pushes many to drop out of school. Such an environment may result in low self-esteem and confidence and desensitise others into thinking of such things as normal and part of acceptable social behaviour. The school is required to provide a positive environment with no punishment, bullying, harassment, intimidation, or use of derogatory language within the school premises. It also needs to build a safe physical environment with safe drinking water, clean toilets, safe playground with minimum risk of accidents and hazards. Online safety is another important area schools may need to address, as technology in the form of mobiles and the internet has entered the lives of children.

Sensitivity and empathy

These two values are at the core of this domain and enable children to understand how others feel and how their words and action may affect others. It also helps them acquire the ability to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of others.

Self-awareness

When children understand themselves better, it is easier for them to build self-esteem. This is very important for children who face difficulties in school or in friendships with other children.

Self-management

This helps children to modify their behaviour, such as controlling their temper. It not only gives them opportunities to understand their challenges but also gives them a sense of what they are doing well. The ability to properly understand one's own and others' feelings affects personal behaviour, such as self-control, which is necessary and empowering.

Schools have decided to bring in practices that will facilitate the development of the above-mentioned dispositions and abilities. Following are some examples of such strategies:

- No corporal punishment of any form in school
- Review and work on issues related to the safety of students such as safe drinking water, clean toilets, safe and clean classrooms, seating arrangements, playgrounds, MDM arrangements etc.
- Develop abilities to provide socio-emotional support to children
- Focus on classroom processes that encourage active learning – thinking and expression.

Encourage children to engage in debates, questioning and critical thinking during classroom transactions. Provide opportunities for self-reflection.

- Demonstrate respect in all their interactions by actively listening to students and their views without any judgement and practising respectful behaviour and language during classroom activities. They will also provide positive reinforcement in the form of praise to those who follow such behaviour.
- Model empathy by expressing their care and concern for the wellbeing of children and responding to them with compassion
- Provide opportunities to all children which will build their self-esteem
- Empower children to be safe in cyberspace

Domain 3. Breaking common stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalised, unsubstantiated and unexamined beliefs about a particular group (caste, class, gender, etc.) of people. Such views are generally used against the minority, deprived and underprivileged sections of society and are used to justify exclusion, discrimination, oppression, harassment, and violence. In a society laden with caste, class, and gender inequalities such stereotypes are divisive and discriminatory barriers to our Constitutional ideals of freedom, equality, justice, and fraternity which the programme seeks to promote.

Many of the challenges in schools are often based on belief in such stereotypes by teachers as well as students and need collective reflection to break. For instance, one commonly-held view is that children from a particular caste or class cannot do well in academics. In a discussion with a group of teachers, this stereotype was placed for reflection on when and how such a belief could have been shaped and who benefits or loses from it. The group concluded that in olden times, feudal landowners must have promoted this view so that the labouring class did not leave their work to get an education.

Analysis and understanding are required to understand that with the appropriate supportive environment, every child can be enabled to study well. Giving children opportunities to learn, is one of the aims of the *Sadbhavna* School Programme.

The dispositions of respect and dignity, critical thinking, sensitivity and collaboration are at the core of this domain. Here are some of the practices that schools implementing this programme have

grouped under this domain:

- Ensure gender equality across all processes by girls and boys working together in school processes, such as MDM. Traditional roles and activities are challenged – girls play games such as football and cricket and boys serve at the mid-day meal (MDM) and sweep the classrooms.
- Establish an egalitarian school culture by encouraging students from all castes to sit, eat and play together. Students follow a rotational seating arrangement where every student gets the opportunity to sit in the front row.
- Encourage a secular environment by promoting secular, patriotic songs in assembly, celebrating major festivals of all religions etc.
- Encourage students from all socio-economic backgrounds to participate in teaching-learning processes and all activities, and take on leadership roles. Representing the school in inter-school competitions and other activities is strongly encouraged.

Domain 4. Extension to community

Parents and the community are important stakeholders in the institution of school. Institutional arrangements have been made to ensure the participation of the community in the management

of schools. However, there is still scope for better collaboration between the community and the school. There remains a need for understanding on the part of the teachers about the parents' abilities to support the children academically. Community backing and participation are essential for the programme and, equally, teachers have to appreciate the constraints of the families. Understanding the local context/language can also help teachers build strong relationships with children and it can also help them design better pedagogic strategies.

All communities have good as well as regressive practices. Teachers can bring the good practices to the fore by inviting community members to share these with the children in school. This will not only help build a connection with the community but also encourage students to appreciate good culture, practices, knowledge and art etc. Similarly, awareness about regressive practices will help teachers design strategies to work on these in school through discussions, analysis and reflections.

The practice of *sadbhavna* is treated as an evolving school order which needs continuous nurturing both within and outside school boundaries in order to gain universality.

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Vani Periodi and Umashanker Periodi

Vani and Umashanker Periodi reminisce candidly about parenting and the unusual style they adopted. Not following norms meant there was trial and error, but never the absence of deep reflection, which influenced their children in positive ways, building resilience, empathy and the ability to adjust to varying life situations.

We had planned for our first child to be born in February and everything was going fine; the doctor had given February 10 as the delivery date. We were very happy that things were going as per our plan. Our first daughter came three weeks earlier, in January, giving us the first lesson in bringing up children – not everything that we plan for our children’s upbringing will go as per our plans! We were reminded of Khalil Gibran, ‘Your children are not your children.’

It is very difficult to plan any intervention with children for concrete outcomes. As far as children are concerned, you can neither leave them to just grow without any planned intervention nor can you plan anything concretely. So, should we allow whatever happens to children to just happen? And not guide them? These are very difficult choices. In this article, we are attempting to reflect on what we, as parents, did because we wanted, our children to be independent, courageous, humane, and free. We did not have any idea how to bring up children and though we got help from others, basically, it was trial and error, succeeding sometimes and failing quite a few times. Many things are done instinctively; many others just happened in the flow as we were living our lives!

Looking back, we can see some of the decisions that helped our children grow. Coming back and relocating to our village was one such decision. This helped in many ways. Our children grew up in a rural environment. Though our village is just 22 km from the city of Mangalore, it is one of the most backward villages in the Bantwal district. We did not have electricity in our house till 1985,

there were just a few houses which had electricity. We started working from our house. We worked with *Chawadi*, an organisation which worked with people, especially the youth, of our village. We trained young girls to perform *Yakshagana*, a male-dominated folk art and dance form. For our own girls, it was a natural upbringing. They imbibed a lot of the village culture and made a lot of friends. We did not have formal jobs; we were freelancing. Hence, they got exposed to poverty, both because our own earnings were meagre, and also because poverty existed so closely around them in the village. This built a good perspective for our girls and exposed them to diversity in relating to and feeling for the vulnerable sections of society. They continued their friendships with their friends in the village after we moved to Bengaluru.

The other important decision was admitting our children to a Kannada-medium government primary school. This was an extremely difficult decision; our friends and relatives discouraged us. But Vani and I were very clear about this – we were certain that our children would get a rich experience in a government school. We were convinced that in government schools, education is good and there is less pressure on children than in private schools. Government schools also have a lot of space, and our daughters would grow up with other village children and some less privileged children. This would give them a sound foundation for their future life.

Our friends came down very heavily on us saying we are depriving our children of the rich experience they would have in a private school. They asked us what we would tell them if later in life our girls questioned this decision which deprived them of private school education. This made us think. And we decided that we would work with the school to provide different types of experiences to children. We planned experiences and exposure that would help children to grow holistically and be independent, rational, humane and free. For this, we organised several creative and leadership experiences, conducted a series of creativity and

leadership workshops, and frequent story-reading sessions, which introduced books to the children of this school. Our friends helped a lot in these practical sessions. We continued these workshops and activities in the school and village even after our children grew up. Our children and their friends continue these activities even now for the children of the village. Studying in a local government school built a very different perspective in our children.

After studying in the government school till class VII, our children went to an alternative school, the Centre for Learning (CFL) In Varadenahalli, near Magadi in Bengaluru. Our children did not know a word of English when they joined this school. But the school built their confidence and never made them feel inferior. The project they did with our children to help them acquire the English language was very creative. They asked our children to direct plays in English for Kannada-medium government school children. The teachers at the school were very good mentors for our children. They knew more about our children than we did and so, naturally, we allowed our girls to be mentored by these teachers. The school provided our children with the space to be highly critical, question everything and be reflective. It introduced our children to a very different social set-up and provided them with a rich social circle.

In developing values, these educational institutions played a very significant role. There was no conflict between the home and the school for our children. First, it was the government school where they were sensitised about freedom, poverty, vulnerability, and diversity and then it was CFL which gave them a strong footing in being critical, questioning everything and being reflective. Finally, all of it got re-established, consolidated, and grounded in the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

From the beginning, we discussed everything with our children -- from our financial problems to whether we should have another child in the family. This culture of discussion and dialogue helped us a lot. Anything and everything would be discussed and jointly decided – the menu for a guest, the tours we undertook, joining school, problems faced by any of us. In later days, this discussion slowly came to the level of dialogue. Now, for everything, there is dialogue. Things are decided and solved through dialogue. It is not easy; takes time because things go back and forth, but ultimately everything ends on a nice note, with everyone's buy-in.

When we were having our first child, we did not

have any support at home. Since Vani was working for *Mahila Samakya* (a Central Government project) as District Co-ordinator, Mysuru we decided that Umashanker would take a break. Looking after the child and maintaining the home, including cooking all three meals, was his responsibility. We continued with this arrangement till our child was three-and-a-half years old and independent. Our child grew up in this atmosphere of the mother going to office and the father looking after the home. This, we feel, developed in her an alternative perspective which came to her very naturally. When our daughter started going to school, she read the common rhyme. '*Appanige office kelasa, Ammanige mane kelasa*' as '*Ammanige office kelasa, Appanige mane kelasa*' (father is working in the office and mother is working in the kitchen to mother is working in the office and father is working in the kitchen). We feel that this had a very strong impact on our children – they had role models at home who were totally different from the mainstream image.

Some simple things that we do with the children also have a far-reaching impact on them. Our Amma (Umashanker's mother) lived with us and looked after our children. Amma had the habit of sniffing snuff, and she would misplace the snuff box all the time. Then a frantic search would ensue. Everyone would be involved. Once Ini, our elder daughter, told Amma, 'You must keep your snuff-box in one place and always keep it in the same place, then you will not misplace it and there will be no searching for it.' Amma not only followed this advice given by her granddaughter but would also acknowledge that this idea of Ini's had solved her problem. One can only imagine how much self-esteem this incident must have given to the young grandchild, making her feel that people can listen to her and follow her advice.

Once, Indu, the younger one, was playing with our neighbour's child. They were making a lot of noise and Umashanker scolded the neighbour's child. The child went home. Indu was offended and started crying. Vani told her to speak to her father about it. Indu came to Umashanker and said, 'Why did you scold her? They don't scold me when I go to their house.' Uma thought about it and said, 'Sorry, I will not scold her again.' Later, when that child came to our house again, the first thing Umashanker did was apologise to her for scolding her. We feel that incidents like these have a very strong message for children.

During one of the reading sessions, Ini was looking

at a book on flags. She said to her mother, 'Amma, among all these flags, the Indian flag is the best.' Vani responded by saying, 'Yes, for us, the Indian flag is the best. For the Americans, it would be their flag, for the Australians, their flag, for the Pakistanis, the Pakistan flag. Each country has their own flag, and they love it. Hence, we can only say we like our flag and not that it is the best flag.' We had forgotten about this incident. Recently, when Ini was doing her PG, she reminded us about this incident and said that had a lasting impression on her and changed the way she looked at things. So, we never know! It is these small-small incidents which make and build values in children.

We built a minimalistic, very simple tiled house. It was without proper doors and windows. Amma came to this house to stay with us. This was a great opportunity for our children. They were brought up by Amma, who was a very strong woman, open and rational. She was open to new things and looked after the children with a lot of freedom. She connected with children very well and during school vacations, all her eight grandchildren came home. For two full months, they would stay in our house, looked after by Amma. This living together was a source of great learning for all our children.

Ini's teeth had gaps and were protruding. Ini wanted to set it right. There was a discussion at home. Do we value this form of beauty? Should we spend such a lot of money on something we do not believe in? But we did not decide for Ini; we told her that if she wants it, she could go ahead with it. Not a single word was spoken about this matter again.

We used to celebrate all festivals – Deepavali, other Hindu festivals, Christmas and Ramzan. Christmas in Mangalore is a lot of fun, and we would visit many friends. Our Indu began the practice of giving gifts to others. She would decorate the Christmas tree and on the eve of Christmas, tie gifts to it as if Santa Claus had brought the gifts. Everyone used to look forward to the surprise gifts. (We stopped this process when we felt that it was becoming a ritual!) We would always meet our Muslim friends during Ramzan. There were occasions when we would have *iftar* in our house inviting them.

Caste was not a topic that we suppressed. We discussed it openly in the family. Umashanker shared a lot of caste discrimination he had experienced as a child. Vani shared the Brahminical culture that was prevalent in their caste. The children grew up understanding both aspects –

higher and lower caste, their manifestations and impact. Children experienced caste discrimination at a very young age. They also learned to cope with it at that young age. Vani spoke to them in *Havyaka*, her mother tongue; we spoke in Kannada at home and the children learnt *Tulu* from Amma and the neighbours. So, culturally, it was a rich amalgam of cultures at home.

Our children have grown up to be politically aware citizens. How this happened, we are not sure. Probably because they participated in all our interactions with friends and various groups. I feel that they naturally imbibed politics as they participated in the movements, protests, workshops, and activities. We did not train them in any ideology or '-isms'. They were free to form their own opinions. We feel this helped them in forming their opinions and taking a stand when required.

Indu had a tough time in the government school. She was compared with her elder sister, and she was not treated well by her teachers. It was a painful experience and she refused to go to school. We gave this a lot of thought and, in the end, asked Indu to stop going to school. We home-schooled her. Our friends helped her with a few subjects and at home, Vani would concentrate on the rest. That we backed her decision gave Indu a lot of confidence.

We used to go on trips together. Simple trips - many times these would be to our friends' houses. But these trips gave us a lot of time together to discuss different things and enjoy the simple things in life. These trips brought our family together. We also took our children to meet our friends and to the meetings of *Samuchaya* and other NGOs. This led to our children building independent relationships with our friends. Some of our younger friends became very close to our children.

One thing that we very consciously did with our children was to not force them to do anything that we felt was right. This, we had learnt the hard way. We have seen many of our senior friends struggling with their children, unable to guide or influence them. We have examples of so many people who uphold high values but have not been able to make their children follow the same. This made us think a lot. We had decided very early in life that we will live the way we want to but will not impose our lifestyle or life choices on our children. Our children would be free to decide whatever they felt was good for them. We would take them along to all workshops, dramas, street theatre, movements, trainings and

wherever we went. After some time, when they were able to decide, we completely left it to them to decide if they wanted to accompany us or not. And then our children would choose to come or not. The decision would be theirs. Many times, we were disappointed and sad due to their decision, but we stuck to ours and respected theirs. This, we felt, made for a very healthy understanding of each other's decisions.

One thing that really worked to our advantage was the fact that we helped each other pursue what they aspired to – from Vani's creative journeys, like drama, quilting, or anything else that she wanted to do, to Ini's interest in dancing and singing or Indu's craftwork and stitching – all of us encouraged each other and made space for each one to pursue their hobbies. I think, in this way, the satisfaction quotient of our family remained high.

Our parenting style was not very heavy; it had a light touch. We did not make rules – hard-and-fast rules that cannot be broken. Nobody was punished; there was no strict regime. There were a few guidelines, and we did what we felt was right at that moment. We took equal responsibility for everything as a family. It was easier this way. For

us, living a smooth life without too much conflict was important.

It was a boon that both of us, Vani and Umashanker, shared a good understanding, had similar values and, by and large, had similar beliefs on bringing up children. Both of us avoided conflict. Understanding each other and responding quickly and rationally to resolve any misunderstanding or conflict that cropped up, was the norm. This was possible because we respected each other a lot. Today, looking back at how we brought our children up, we see many things we did with a purpose, but there are many things that went against our beliefs.

Going back to the question we asked at the beginning – can we plan everything for our children? The answer is a clear NO! Then, should we leave it just like that? No, we have to strike a balance. A balance between planned intervention and freedom. We need to let a child choose her own path; we must support her but basically, let her do what she wants to. The fundamental thing is that we have to first live the values that we want to propagate. This is the ultimate lesson! You live life the way you want; children will pick up what they want.



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‘What would you want to talk about if you got the freedom to speak about anything?’

‘I will scream... so loud, and no one should stop me!’

During a story-reading session at a Primary Government School in Uttarakhand, we were reading the bilingual story, *I Wish/Meri Arzoo* about sixteen children sharing their wishes, given the freedom to ask for anything. Building on the story, as a facilitator, I asked my students about their wishes and received the above response from one child.

This wish to scream could have multiple reasons – students want to make noise, create a disturbance or express hidden emotions. It could also be a suppressed desire or an experience of violence and abuse. I did not know then but decided to do

a follow-up session to create a space for a clearer expression of this. It may not always be possible to uncover the reason or solve a problem, but a teacher/facilitator must create a ‘safe space’ in the classroom for children to express their emotions. I designed an ‘expression’ session (Lesson Plan 1) using another story, *Who Stole Bhaiya’s Smile?* written by Sanjana Kapoor, and some elements of visual arts.

Lesson Plan: Expressing emotions

Objective: To create a space for children to feel free to talk about their imaginations, dreams and choices.

Classes: IV-V (ages 9-10 years)

Time duration: 1 hour

Art form: Storytelling

	Activity	Execution	Outcome
Circle	How are you feeling today? Name the emotion.	Ask the children to sit in a circle; ask the question, and as the facilitator, be the first one to share your emotion. By turns, encourage each one to answer.	Children take time to think about how they are feeling and name the emotion.
Warm-up	Place colours in front of them (crayons, colour pencils, oil pastels, sketch pens – all dry mediums available can be provided). It also depends on what colours are available. The facilitator asks questions picking each of the following emotions: What colour do you associate with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happiness • Calm • Love • Disgust • Anger 	For every question in the sequence, ask them to pick a colour and write/draw what it makes them feel.	Children learn to associate colours with emotions.

	Activity	Execution	Outcome
Creation	Read the book: <i>Who Stole Bhaiya's Smile?</i> written by Sanjana Kapoor.	At the mention of an emotion and the monster in the book, ask the children to pick and paint using colours that resonate with the emotion; make sure to talk about feelings in a sequence that is from negative to positive. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your monster look? • How does your anger look? • How does your sadness look? • How do you feel when nobody understands your problem? • How do you feel when somebody tries to cheer you up when you are upset? • How does your peace look? • How does your love look? • How does your happiness look? 	The freedom of choice brings out a sense of individuality and introduces children to respect the private space of each individual in the group. Focus on their artworks to understand which emotion is complicated for them to express.
Closing	What emotion are you feeling now?	Give them a few minutes to open up and if they do not start, prompt them with an example. All children in the circle answer by turns.	Reflection on their own emotions.

This session helped the children form an association between their emotions and colours and provided them with a space to express their unexpressed emotions. We drew our emotions – monsters, anger, sadness, calmness, care, love, and happiness. Everyone had different ideas and colours for their emotions. This session taught them that each of us is a different individual with different feelings and emotions.

How did this session work with the student who wanted to scream? The child had drawn a scrambled face to express his emotion of anger - that was his monster, he said. His selection of colours to depict it, the space for being aware of his emotion and using colours for venting it out was his first step towards healing. He learned that he had a way out - through colouring and expression.



Figure 1. Children playing with colours during a session at Rang Kaarwaan Learning Centre, Champawat.



Figure 2. Children and the facilitator playing a game to get comfortable with body movements at Government Primary School, Simalta, Champawat.

You are a teacher, and you can do it!

Expressive art is a therapeutic combination of creative art forms like play, drama, movement, storytelling, music, and visual arts. It is important to talk about emotions in the classroom and provide a space for expression. When children experience a new emotion, they want to share it but are generally not encouraged to do so. Such emotions, if left unexpressed, lead to negative social behaviours, like bullying. Creative art forms are fun to engage in and also create space for building trust.

Teachers/facilitators do not have to be professional artists to conduct sessions using expressive arts. Their role here is to provide children with space to explore their creativity. Teachers/facilitators are required to notice the changes in the students'

expressions while they do the body movements, the artwork and in the roles that they take up while playing a game. These are the details that will help them in designing subsequent sessions.

Expressive arts help build a group relationship and bridge the teacher-student gap as the teacher/facilitator also becomes a part of the circle sharing their own emotions. In the lesson session mentioned, students drew their emotions using different expressions and colours. It helped them realise that each of them is different from the rest. This understanding helps in promoting cooperation rather than competition. They also realised that all of us (including me) experience different emotions at different times, in different ways. This creates a culture of care and empathy in the classroom.



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My focus in this article is on methods of teaching to facilitate the social and emotional wellbeing of a student with a developmental disability, who was waiting for a chance to be included in the class, and the role played by peers in achieving this.

The context

While most of the world was trying to adapt to online teaching-learning in the aftermath of the pandemic, we tried an alternative with the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) libraries. This was a simple model to connect the school and school children within a five-kilometre radius of the GP library. We met learners of all age groups every day, engaged for a few hours in which the emphasis was largely on experiencing things, such as touching and feeling the physical attributes of materials; watching patterns and processes, as when green and red colours are mixed, they can give ranges of brown colour based on the amount of primary colours used; playing with colours, making fingerprints, vegetable and leaf prints; doing physical activities, like laughing, jumping, running and then realising that they feel thirsty after these; cognitive actions involving a lot of thinking, such as asking questions and reflecting on possible answers and interacting in an atmosphere that was light and enjoyable. As this was the start of the learning-recovery phase, there were language and maths activities for children from classes I to VII. We made a timetable together with the teachers of three schools around the GP Library, Ujjini. It focussed only on foundational literacy and numeracy activities. The worksheets produced by Azim Premji Foundation served as a reference. On one such day, we had planned these activities: sketching/painting each child's favourite place, story-building, picture-reading, and reading aloud followed by counting activities.

In the sketching activity, most of the children drew their school, a few drew their homes. As part of the counting activities, we began with identifying smaller quantities in the book and gradually moved

towards larger ones. This activity was for 14 *Nalika* students from classes I to III. We chose a few concrete objects for them to count and then moved to pictures and then matched quantities mentioned in the pictures with an equal number of objects. We then moved towards the entrance of the library and went up and down the stairs, counting them as we did so. There were ten steps in the first flight of stairs and ten more in the next. Children would count the number of steps going up and count in reverse order as they came down. They did this in twos and threes, until finally, one student stood on any step, while the others shouted out the number. The objective of this activity was to enhance ordinality and cardinality in children.

There was a child in my class, called Ruby, who would attend the activities every day, but remained isolated. Her classmates and teachers at the school said that she did not speak much and was marginally developmentally delayed. Ruby would listen to the instructions for other activities but would continue to do some painting or sketching activities by herself. She refused to participate and only watched the other activities. On that day, however, Ruby suddenly said, '*Yerike ilike krama*,' (ascending and descending order).

The rest of the children were intrigued and asked her what she was saying.

Ruby pointed to the staircase and said, 'This is ascending and descending order.'

Another student cried out with joy, 'Yes, Miss, she is right!'

Another student explained, 'Coming down the stairs is decreasing order and climbing up the stairs is ascending order!'

Ruby explained with the action of climbing stairs, 'Count 1, 2, 3...'

Ruby has a little trouble talking due to which I found it difficult to follow her, but her classmates could understand her better because they were

familiar with her both inside and outside the classroom. All the children picked up the pulse and started counting while going up the stairs 1, 2, 3, 4... and then in reverse while coming down the stairs. We then also tried identifying the next and previous numbers by referring to specific steps. For instance, one child would stand on the fourth stair and the remaining children would name the next stair as five and the previous one as three. We had collectively established a method for answering – children who knew the answer would raise their hands and would be given a chance to answer, one at a time. We played this game until everyone got a chance. Ruby was specific about the choice and method of self-knowledge construction, although she was learning at a different pace from the rest and was probably waiting for the right moment to respond. As a subject practitioner, this class offered me a hands-on experience in designing an inclusive classroom or an inclusive educational method. There was an immediate shift in the way the teacher and the rest of the class saw Ruby the moment she uttered, '*Yerike ilike krama!*'

This day was fun-filled and satisfying with one concrete form of learning. Historically, researchers state that learning, meaning-making, and knowledge construction occur in a stressless, peaceful and relaxed environment. I would say mental health or social and emotional wellbeing has a direct connection with the quality and pace of knowledge construction. After watching the functionality and fun of learning at the GP library, Ujjini, many other libraries in that district tried this model and thrived in this process of comprehensive learning. These learning groups around GP libraries are called the *Gram Panchayat* Library Learning Units, which continue to function today even after regular schooling has begun. Now, these classes are run on specific days with teachers and the librarian planning daily events and activities. The community is happy to see their children being engaged in these learning activities.

I have heard from the librarian that Ruby is a regular visitor to the library and goes through all the books in the library. Although Ruby has difficulties in reading, she points to the pictures in the books and tries to construct stories around them and enjoys narrating these to the librarian.

During my visits to her school, the teacher also mentioned that Ruby seems to have developed an interest in creating stories by watching a picture. Also, now she has started taking part in the general classroom activities, a little slow perhaps, but she wants to respond. The teacher also stated that since the library incident, the rest of the class also makes visible attempts to talk to Ruby and include her in their playtime. Now Ruby has friends, she talks, laughs and runs in the corridors during lunch breaks like the rest.

Being human, we tend to have prejudices, however, as teachers or practitioners, it is our responsibility to stay consciously unbiased. Every learner has different capabilities and it is for us to provide them with the right opportunities for expression.

Earlier, teachers and Ruby's classmates would swamp me down with comments, such as 'Ruby doesn't talk', 'Ruby doesn't know anything', 'She does not play with us', etc. After listening to all this, at first, I too had stopped making conscious efforts with Ruby, because I had assumed that Ruby would not be interested in the classroom processes. However, this question arose in my mind: 'What is the use of implementing inclusive education if children do not feel they are included?' It seemed to me that not being included in the class is the first instance of inequality an individual with diverse needs is presented with, and the individual is not even in a position to recognise and fight for this right. The role of teachers becomes irreplaceable because students spend a large part of their lives in school with them. The role of primary school teachers is even more pivotal because this is the phase of children's lives when basic attitudes are established. Facing prejudice at this point in life can have devastating consequences.

Students like Ruby are often a part of our classrooms and have been there even before the pandemic. The pandemic created a greater awareness of socio-emotional wellbeing, making us more empathetic. Ruby was just waiting for the right opportunity to participate, which illustrates that, as a teacher, my primary responsibility is to create opportunities for each child in the classroom, irrespective of their learning levels.

This class showed me that the emotional wellbeing

of children is the primary requirement for comprehensive learning, and it can be achieved through inclusive education design as one of the

methods. Inclusive education, then, is a process and not just a destination.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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Both as a social and a learning process, learning happens best in an inclusive environment with cooperation and collaboration where everyone feels cared for and is exposed to diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.

Suresh Sahu, Constitutional Values in School | Sadbhavna School Programme, p 18

In the post-pandemic context, I have been looking for effective mediums to engage children in a way that their interest in learning gradually returns. Play and theatre-based activities have always been my go-to mode of expression to engage with children in an easy and fun-filled manner in a classroom. Physical movement and facial expressions have helped me break the language barrier since I am a south Indian working in a region where *Bundelkhandi* is the first language of the children. In the initial days of my classroom practice, I always ensured that I took the class through different sets of warm-ups and various in-between activities so that the children stayed engaged and the energy of the class remains high.

Other than the known aspects of how these mediums subtly lead to working on the values of confidence, teamwork, hard work, unity, adjustment, etc., learning to participate well, both on their own and through group activities in the classroom, helps a child have a pleasant social experience and build healthier interpersonal relationships with their peers. Acquiring these social skills leads to the social and cognitive development of the child. Through these, children learn more about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses and, as Margaret Mead said, they help the child 'to construct a sense of self'.

Circle time

Reflecting on my school experience of engaging with these two mediums on a daily basis with a lot of variety to prevent it from being monotonous, I observed that the children liked to stand in a big circle, do free movements, speak, sing or recite with actions – everything they are usually asked to not do in a classroom! In the initial stages, I transacted the lesson and did almost all activities sitting in a circle.

I started my school engagement by first doing this introduction activity – we stood in a circle and took turns introducing ourselves with an action. The children were initially shy, even after seeing me and their class teacher introduce ourselves with

actions. So, I motivated and urged the children to try doing the actions and helped those who were shy to come up with an action with which they could introduce themselves. To keep everyone engaged, I asked the others to pose this question in unison: 'What is your name?' Each child had to, with action and voice modulation, reply to this with 'My name is...'.

But the fun did not end here. The children were asked to repeat the action of each child who introduced herself/himself. This was also to help them remember names. So, when one child imitated flying like a fairy and said, 'My name is Soumya', all the children imitated her flying action and repeated, 'My name is Soumya'.

In a fun way, I stopped them and asked, 'Is your name Soumya?' The children giggled, and I asked, 'What should you say?' pointing to Soumya. The correct answer came, 'Her name is Soumya!'. The activity went on with the children learning each other's names and also attempting to involve those who do not usually talk much in class. Even the class teacher was glad to see that the children who did not participate much in the class reacted and engaged through these activities. I strongly believe that such activities are an expression of our inherent yearnings and while engaging in certain games/activities there is a sense of joy and satisfaction that children feel.

Creating a safe space

One day, I spent the first few hours of school talking with the teachers and the headmistress and was late for class. So, we immediately set out to work. A child caught me off guard when he asked, 'Won't we do anything today?' He was hinting at the activities. Several other children added, 'Let's do something, 'Let's do (they made the body movements referring to the warm-up)'. I was immediately encouraged because certain practices, once well-started need the enthusiasm of the participants to keep them going, and the children who were hesitant to talk and engage with me and did not listen to anyone but their class

teacher were now talking to me without hesitation, shyness, or fear. It made me realise how doing such activities that involve breaking the traditional notion of the silent classroom, put the children at ease. I have observed that when children feel safe in a space and feel that it belongs to them, it paves the way for their interest in the schooling process as a whole, such as regular attendance at first, and gradual improvement in their participation in the teaching-learning process and so on.

In another instance, a child called Aman came up to me while the other children were enthusiastically standing in a circle, ready to recite a poem. He did not seem to be feeling well and he asked if he could sit down. I told him to sit and listen to the poem. This incident too demonstrates that a safe space in which a child could come and talk to me was established. That the child could acknowledge his feelings was very special, because it, in turn, was a reminder to me of how living in this fast-paced world, we too do not acknowledge our own needs. Here was a child who expressed his need and did not just sit silently without participating. This was a personal moment of reflection and learning for me.

Learning maths through role-play

I make my session plan to ensure that there are multiple activities around a given concept so that I get to engage with the children in a way that their energies and their attention spans are channelised in the best possible way.

While reading and reciting a poem on *Choocha* (mouse), we did a role-play on cats and mice. I had first asked the children to be the cat and mice but since they did not have an idea as to what I was expecting them to do, I became the cat and asked the children to run around as mice. In this game, the cat (me) had to catch the mice (the children) and whoever the cat touched, was 'out'. Those who were 'out' had to lie down still. I asked some of the more energetic children to not run but crawl. Next, a child took my place as the cat. Soon, there were ten 'out' and three 'not out' mice and one cat left in the game. I made the three 'not out' children lie down and pretend to be asleep, while those who were 'out' counted the total number of mice.

The children of class I were initially counting nine mice, by one-to-one correspondence, and were forgetting to count themselves. There were two children from class II in that group, and they were able to count nine correctly and along with that, count themselves in too, because they were 'out' too. Seven children got the cardinality rule right and I hope that after this, the other children will also be able to grasp the cardinality principle easily.

As I engage with these mediums regularly, I realise that these give the children space to learn new things at their own pace. It creates an atmosphere that is most suitable to enhance experimental and experiential learning which leads to the all-around growth and development of the children.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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Storybooks Help Children Express Emotions

Melody Xalxo

Today, Lali was silent in the centre. She did not feel like studying. The other children wanted to talk to her, but she did not respond and looked sad. When it was time for the centre to close, all the children started going home, Lali also put her books into her bag and was ready to leave. I went to her and took her hand. She stopped and looked at me in surprise. I asked, 'What happened to you, Lali? Are you sad?' She did not say anything. I asked her again, 'Lali, you can tell me, what happened to you? Did someone say anything to you?' Tears welled up in her eyes. She looked at me and said, 'Kanchan and I used to always come to school together. For a few days now, she has not been talking to me properly. She has a new friend. Sometimes, when they both talk while looking at me, I feel as if they are talking about me. I feel like crying. I go to Mummy, but Mummy is busy with her work and taking care of my younger sister.'

As a teacher, it is my responsibility to understand the needs of my students, their socio-emotional state, their fears, phobias, and concerns. Today, when I was discussing a storybook with children, many such things came to the fore. I would like to share them with you.

At the *Mohalla* Learning Activity Centre (MohLAC) today, there was a discussion on the book '*Nanha Hathi Lai-Lai*', written by Shekhar Dattatri. It read, 'The little elephant is only one day old. He can stand and walk by himself now. Wherever his mother goes, he goes with her.' I asked the children why human babies cannot walk the moment they are born. Their answer was that human babies' legs are weak and they need older people to support them. Children said: When we cry, bathe, or change clothes, we need someone. So, I asked again, 'Now, do you still feel the need for such support?' 'Yes,' said the children.

This made me think. Lali needed Kanchan because, at her age, children need a friend with whom they can share everything and whom they can trust. Spending time with friends helps them explore newer things in life. Children are committed to maintaining friendships where they remain

emotionally invested. Kanchan was Lali's only friend. Lali was upset and worried: How would she go to school alone? Whom will she sit with? With whom will she eat and with whom will she have fun? She also felt that she had been rejected by her own friend. It was difficult for her to accept the rejection without Kanchan giving her any reason. Feelings of rejection not only affect a child's emotional development but can also have an impact on their mental, intellectual, and cognitive development.

'Lai-Lai enjoys playing in the water, but Amma has to stay close. He is always close to his mother and aunts,' I read and asked the children why Lai-Lai had to stay with his mother and aunts. The children's answer was 'because of fear'. Fear of what, I asked. They said, 'Maybe he is scared of getting drowned in water or being attacked by a big animal when he is alone, or afraid of thunder and lightning, or the dark.' I asked them, 'What are you scared of?' We made a list of things they feared. For the purpose of this discussion, I would like to talk about two of their fears:

- Fear of exams: One child said that he is scared of exams. Others added that they worry that they will not understand some questions or when the teacher comes close to them. They also expressed their fear of failing exams and if that would make their friends leave them; or that their friends' parents may ask them to do so. They also worried that people in their locality would laugh at them.
- Fear of an alcoholic father: A girl from class V said, 'Didi, I feel scared when my father comes home drunk. Sometimes he fights with mom, even beats her, and we children hide in a corner.' When the girl was telling me this, her face was careworn. I do not know how many children were there who felt petrified and insecure in their own homes. When children are not able to put forth their fears and needs before their fathers, if they cannot talk to them openly, gradually the relationship deteriorates.

After this interaction, I felt that in spite of our being there for the children, they had to go through a

lot of emotional turmoil. This means that we are not able to build a relationship with them based on friendship; they do not feel free to approach us and share their problems with us. For all of us working in the field of education and my teacher colleagues, I would like to say that we also need to pay attention to the mental health of children since they spend a lot of time with us in school. We need to build a close relationship with them so that they can reach out to us without any hesitation. Also, it is very important to try and create a friendly environment in the class and outside it. If a child is not able to speak to us directly, then he can convey his problems and thoughts to us through her/his diary or letter. We must encourage this.

If I had not asked Lali the reason for her being sad, she would have felt that she was alone. Sometimes, loneliness can create fear, embarrassment, or

feelings of insecurity in children and can be a threat to their learning and development.

Storybooks provide avenues to discuss emotional topics with children. These stories of other children are meant to make them feel that they are not alone in how they feel fear, loneliness or alienation; other children also go through the same emotions. Some books like *Bambu*, *Guthli Toh Pari Hai*, *Macher Jhol*, *Jamlo*, *Meri Zoya Chali Gayi*, *Pyari Madam*, etc., describe different emotions of children. For example, '*Meri Zoya Chali Gayi*' by Richa Jha is a book which deals with the loneliness that the character feels when his sister Zoya passes away. In Rinchin's '*Pyari Madam*', a little girl writes about her joys, her troubles, her excitements, her sorrows, and her quirky questions to her teacher in the form of letters.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

Endnotes

- i Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (MohLAC) are centres where children from government primary schools can do basic language and math work. During the COVID-19 period, when schools were closed, Eklavya's *Jashn-e-Taleem* Project opened these centres in some villages of six development blocks of the Hoshangabad district and started the process of teaching children. These centres continue to this day. In addition to the teaching of language and mathematics, they have a library/reading corner where storytelling, discussion on books, and other activities are carried out.

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Preventing Segregation in Classrooms

Naveen Kumar Paswan

Throughout my sixteen years of education, from class I to my undergraduate degree, I barely talked to the girls in my classroom. Though some boys would talk to girls without hesitation, I had some psychological barriers to interacting with them. Moreover, I also led a group in my class that did not talk to girls. Now, after all these years, I wonder what stopped me from talking to girls. Why did I stop my friends from doing so? Did it have something to do with my parents or my teachers? Was it the effect films had on me? In this article, I share some experiences that affected me as a student, and which may still be affecting other children today. The article also highlights the impact of gender segregation on the class in general and on the holistic learning of students in particular. Finally, it also suggests ways of bridging these segregations within the classroom.

School provides us with the first socialising space beyond the family. There was a separation in the seating arrangements of boys and girls in my school. I did not talk to girls, or even boys, outside my group. I believed girls to be intellectually inferior compared to boys and did not feel any respect for them, though I saw my sister and some of my women teachers as exceptions to this. Being a part of an only-boys group, I had limited exposure, hence, limited learning. This segregation led to the formation of a self-view and choices that affected my behaviour till as late as completing my undergraduate degree.

A false self-image

I had developed a self-image of being an ideal person. The desire to maintain this self-image controlled all my actions. To me, being ideal was being a person of principles, one who did not give a chance for anyone to question my behaviour; a boy who did not talk to girls. I successfully built this presumably 'clean' image in the eyes of my friends' parents; they trusted me and would easily allow my friends to do anything I was involved in. The school administration had similar trust in me. They would consult me to take feedback on any new teacher, or to know the names of my classmates involved

in some mischief. To maintain this image, I would give them the names of my friends, even if it meant that we fought over it later. It used to be a very tough situation for me. I stopped myself and my friends from interacting with girls to maintain this self-image. I would pressure them by not talking to them if they talked to girls. I would pretend to be extremely rude to girls to maintain this image. We, as a group, would bully girls by commenting on them in class. The segregation inside the class was not only between the boys and the girls. The class was also segregated into two different groups of boys.

Neither the school administration nor my parents had deliberately encouraged such an attitude. But at the same time, it is a fact that neither family nor teachers ever addressed it. It was at the age of 21 that I joined an NGO and underwent gender training. That training made me aware of the biases that existed in me. It was then that I realised that all the while, as a student, my actions were driven by stereotypes and prejudices against women. I remembered an incident when, as an 11-year-old, I objected to my elder sister wearing jeans. I realised how insensitive I had been for so many years.

Preventing segregation

Teachers have a vital role in bringing change in the classroom. They can take steps to eliminate segregation inside the school and develop the classroom as a holistic learning space for everyone. I wonder what the teachers in my school could have done to minimise segregation in my classroom. The following are some of the actions which teachers can take to address segregation in classrooms.

Encouraging talking about emotions

Teachers can facilitate an emotional environment in the school, where children are encouraged and helped to talk about feelings, like love, hate, jealousy and fear. This will create a space where children can share their fear and anxiety and help each other overcome them.

Formation of mixed groups

Teachers can assign group work to small subgroups

formed by the children from different segregated groups. This would make children of different segregated groups interact with one another.

Assigning collaborative tasks

Teachers can promote interaction among students by deliberately assigning them collaborative tasks in which they learn to work together, set common goals and develop a sense of cohesion and respect for other students. Teachers can do this by forming groups so that individuals from two segregated groups get more time to interact and understand one another in working together.

Building a common understanding

Teachers can build a culture of hearing different voices in their classrooms by encouraging students to share their opinions, listen to different opinions and then build a common understanding.

Balancing power in the classroom

Teachers can easily sense the group dynamics of the class. They can use this to balance the power between the dominating and the dominated groups. Teachers can facilitate the participation of children from the dominated group by deliberately asking for their opinions and supporting their arguments.

Renowned psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, suggests the following be done in a classroom to build student cohesion among students:

Setting up common goals

Setting up a common goal towards which the entire class must work collaboratively will help children identify and work for the collective goals of the class.

Differentiating self from others

The teacher can build an understanding and acceptance amongst students that individuals are different on the basis of their social and psychological experiences. This would help in building a better understanding of the self and the other. This will also help in developing respect for

people with different opinions.

Becoming comfortable with others

Accepting people with different viewpoints is a difficult task as it requires the skill of questioning one's own opinion on an issue. Teachers can facilitate this process by helping students become comfortable with each other's views. The children then must be made aware of the value of the contribution of each classroom member.

Facing dissent

The teacher can help students develop the ability to face dissent from other members and cope with it. Students will learn to object to the ideas, not the person. This ability would equip them to think of an issue from multiple perspectives.

Facilitating feedback process

Craig Stevens, a school psychologist, recommends the concept of feedback. In this process, children are encouraged to express constructive ideas, feelings, and criticisms. Each child is given a chance to express himself/herself, but with the right to refuse. This helps children in asking questions in a non-combative way. As a result, the children become verbally expressive, feel more responsible for their words and actions and become more sensitive towards others.

Interacting with classmates from different gender and ideologies would enable every child to get a comprehensive picture of things rather than seeing them from a single point of view. Students will learn the value of differences and diversity of thoughts and preferences. Promoting a culture of interaction in school would develop the school into a place for holistic learning and growth where students learn from each other and collectively arrive at better alternatives. This will be possible once students become aware of and start practising specific values in classrooms, including the importance of respecting individuals and friendships and focusing on the larger goals of the self and the group.



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Implementing Socio-emotional Support Programmes

Nirmala D

VOICES

Socio-emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, develop healthy attitudes, manage emotions and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and thoughtful decisions. To achieve these outcomes, it is important to understand teachers' socio-emotional background and make them understand how important these are in the learning processes of children as well, primarily understanding children better. This includes their family and societal backgrounds – factors which affect their learning.

This is especially important at this juncture when we are just coming out of the COVID-19 situation which had a disastrous impact on children's education. There were behavioural changes and inconsistencies in their learning process. For this to change, teachers need to focus more on listening to their students and working on building a better rapport with them. To address this aspect of children's wellbeing, we focussed on three programmes.

Three programmes for SEL

Vidya Pravesh

Vidya Pravesh was introduced as a short-term programme of ten weeks for classes I and II. It is a *Greet & Meet* initiative in which teachers devised different ways of greeting children each day. Then children assembled in the classroom and talked about their routines, family, interests or anything else that they wished to share. This space offered the children a platform to share their varied experiences, and at the same time, it gave teachers an opportunity to understand the children, their day-to-day activities and home environments better.

Children loved these sessions as the teachers welcomed the children with smiling faces, shook their hands or gave them hugs. These gestures are important for building deep relationships with children and also helped the teachers to successfully address and get in touch with their own emotions.

As we all know, addressing socio-emotional concerns is not a one-time activity and must be integrated with the teaching-learning process as a whole. So, while this will continue, other strategies in this direction to address the emotional needs of the children are being implemented. Some of these are, narrating stories in which there are different emotions, and hanging emotion charts in the classroom to help children understand the emotions that they experience and how to respond to them.

We have initiated these discussions with teachers and are planning to integrate these aspects into all our future engagements. However, we have to overcome some challenges which we see on the ground, such as children's lack of interest in learning and a drastic reduction in their attention spans.

Malebillu

Another initiative that we introduced was *Malebillu* for classes IV-VIII. The aim of this was to primarily encourage children to come to school. To perform better in the classroom, making them come to school and sit in the classroom is crucial. The children became very enthusiastically involved in this programme since it was activity-based. One of the teachers observed that educating the parents was as important as educating the children because of parents' high expectations from schools and children. Parents need to understand that the teachers are as concerned about the children's learning as they are and that the recovery of learning will be a slow and long process that should be handled sensitively for the children's emotional wellbeing.

In the case of first-generation school-goers, where children do not get any learning support after school hours, teachers have to work harder and with greater sensitivity to help them attain the required outcomes. Such concern of teachers also addresses children's socio-emotional needs.

Nali-Kali

Children up to 3-years of age follow the *Nali-Kali* process, which is completely activity-based and

fosters peer learning. This means that there are no standard sitting arrangements – the children move around the classroom, meet their peers and sing action songs. The teacher also sits in their group/ circle and is more of a facilitator. This is also a way of addressing the children’s emotional needs.

One teacher mentioned that along with creating a fear-free environment in her school by giving children opportunities to express themselves in every learning process, she taught them little-little things by example. For instance, when children

littered in the school compound, she would pick it up and throw it into the dustbin. Soon she did not have to do it; children were using the dustbin and it became a habit with them. She also stories and folk tales in their home language to give the children a sense of right and wrong. Learning values in the classroom and realising the importance of the socio-emotional wellbeing of children and its impact on their development, plays a crucial role in the teaching-learning process.



Figure 1. Children engaged in an activity to understand place value.



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Recently, we celebrated *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*, a glorious 75 years of India's independence. This means that we have been an independent country for 75 years and have our own Constitution in which we set out lofty values which we as a nation would like to follow to build a new India. However, it is evident that we have taken very little action in creating awareness about these Constitutional values – we have not made the Constitution accessible for reading or making children understand/ internalise the real meaning of the constitutional values. Studies show that values are actually acquired by children between the ages of 5-7 years and our efforts as a nation, society and individuals towards achieving these values have been inadequate. This article highlights what just one person can achieve if there is the will to do so.

A teacher on a mission

Shekhar Nayak, an assistant teacher in the Government Lower Primary School, Godinal, (Koppal district, Karnataka) is a teacher who attempts to practise Constitutional values in life. This school is in a remote community which has little knowledge about schooling or education. The small school campus has just three concrete rooms with a stone carving of the Preamble of the Constitution of India welcoming visitors at the entrance. A student reads out the Preamble and others follow her/him as a part of the daily school assembly so that by class V, every one of them is easily able to repeat the Preamble from memory.

Shekhar Nayak tries to use every opportunity he gets to instil Constitutional values in the children by:

- Equality: respecting children by calling them by their proper names; respecting physical appearance and socio-economic backgrounds; and treating all genders equally
- Liberty: allowing all children to speak, letting them sit in the place where they want to
- Fraternity: encouraging empathy for one another, teamwork, and appreciation of each others' work

He does this through what he calls 'the democratic process' practised everywhere – from the school assembly to the classroom. From a circular seating arrangement to giving importance to each child to open up during discussions, appreciating every child's opinion, and questioning them to understand and explore what is right and wrong. This has helped him gain trust and build a close rapport with both the children and the community. His sensitivity towards educating girls is appreciable and has contributed to increased enrolment every academic year. Currently, it is 142, with more girls than boys in the school.

Shekhar Nayak's attitude towards children and education has helped him in developing a classroom practice in which the teacher, both individually and together with the children, has set a few norms. These include a circular seating arrangement to ensure that the teacher and each student are visible to everyone during discussions and the teacher joins the children for the midday meal. Listening to others and appreciating each one's opinions, raising hands and waiting for their turn to ask questions or share their opinions during discussions are the norms the students follow, and which have helped Shekar Nayak's students in developing a sense of respect towards each other.

Initially, it was challenging for him to make children open up during conversations but by becoming one among them; contextualising their situations and connecting every discussion to children's lives, he has been able to achieve this. He says that being democratic is not very easy because it is an entirely new way of looking at things which takes time to get used to.

The process

Shekhar Nayak initiated this democratic process by giving children non-academic responsibilities, such as celebrating national festivals, inviting children's inputs on how to conduct festivals and inviting parents and the community to such celebrations. He started this with a small group of children

and saw positive changes in their behaviours and, gradually, their academic performance. The teaching-learning process has been very successful, with 95 percent of children from class III and above having achieved reading with comprehension and independent writing skills, as well as the four basic operations in maths.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, he visited every child's home and created two learning groups for children in public places near their homes. He invested half a day with each group ensuring their learning. He also supported individual children, whose parents were hesitant to send them to community classes because of the pandemic, by visiting their homes.

Additionally, children's questions on superstitions led him to organise community events to address these.

Four-point programme

Shekhar Nayak's democratic process emphasises the following points:

1. The Preamble of the Constitution of India should be made accessible to everyone. Presently, it is very hard to find it in public places, like offices and schools in the country. Displaying

the Preamble on the walls of schools will give it greater visibility and children, even if they are unable to understand its meaning, will at least see it regularly and tell others about it. This can be considered as the first step towards creating a notion of the society we want to create.

2. Most adults struggle to recall even the first two or three lines of the Preamble. The reading of it, along with the national anthem, during the daily school assembly should be made mandatory.
3. Real values are acquired not by what we say, but by what we practise and demonstrate. When children make mistakes either in the classroom or outside, the adults in charge should be seen to be practising the principles of the Preamble so that children follow their example without actively being prompted to do so.
4. Learning actively about democracy helps children receive the respect they deserve, irrespective of age, helps them voice their opinions and be open to accepting others' opinions, develops communication skills and the critical thinking required for scientific temper. Teamwork and collaboration should also be encouraged.



Figure 1. Government Lower Primary School, Godinal

Shekhar Nayak says, 'It is sensitivity and respect towards others, irrespective of their age, that has helped me to develop the concept of the democratic school process. Creating opportunities for every

child to speak and to question and respecting socio-economic and religious diversities has helped me to achieve these outcomes.'



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All of us have different identities, some of which are ascribed to us by societal and economic structures, such as caste, gender, class, religion, etc. All of these play a role in deciding our day-to-day choices as well as experiences. This applies to classroom spaces as well. This is where our role as a teacher or facilitator comes in – to navigate and address social, psychological and political aspects that shape our lives.

Isha Badkas, Comprehensive Sexuality Education | A Spectrum of Possibilities, p 49

As part of my assignment for a seven-month course in Child Development, Special Needs and Learning,ⁱ I undertook the case study of a child named Devraj living in Borkunda village in the Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. The village has a tribal population of about 1000-1200 people and most of them are daily-wage earners. Devraj is an 11-year-old boy who has a disability in his right hand. His parents abandoned him when he was very young because of his disability, and he lives with his maternal grandmother. Devraj does not have an identity proof (birth certificate or *Aadhaar* Card) because of which he is deprived of all government benefits and schemes. The government school teacher in the village enrolled him in the school on the basis of a letter from the *gram panchayat* secretary. He is not regular to school and prefers to spend the whole day roaming around and playing with his friend, Gopi.

One step at a time

I spoke with his grandmother, his teacher and people in the village to try and find out more about his social, mental and emotional behaviour. I learned that he is not very interactive, and, except for his friend Gopi, he does not feel comfortable playing with any other child. He has developed the habit of eating *pan masala* (and often throws tantrums for the money to buy it).

From his teacher, I got to know that he had attended school for less than a month in the academic year and did not show interest in his studies because he did not feel comfortable inside the class and always wanted to go out. Most of the time, he sat idle in the classroom and did not respond to any of the questions asked in class. During the discussion with the community, I observed that people around him pitied him and blamed his fate. Other children bullied and mocked him, calling him different names.

I then went to visit him at his home. Looking for his home, I asked in the neighbourhood and his neighbours pointed from a distance to a boy lying on a cot. When I called out to him, this boy walked

up to me with a shy smile. I noticed that he seemed to have a disability in his leg as well.

As he walked towards me, all kinds of questions came to my mind. Would he open up to me? Would I be able to help him as it was my first time working directly with a child with a disability? Would he be comfortable talking about the challenges faced by his family? Would the family feel that I was there only to complete my assignment? What if my questions hurt him? I was conscious of how I must approach this matter with sensitivity. Very gently, I asked him his name twice. His neighbour whispered, 'Raja'; he smiled at the neighbour and looked at me with bright, shining eyes filled with innocence. I reframed my question and asked, 'Is your name Raja?'

'Devraj,' he said, loud and clear, with confidence. His strong voice made me feel that he was angry with how people spoke about him.

After a few visits, I realised that the people around him made him feel that he was different from them and that he would never have a normal life; that after his grandmother, there would be no one to look after him – a fact that scared him. From my conversations with him, I learned that he himself did not want to be treated as 'special' or as someone who needed help even with his daily chores. He did not want anyone to feel sorry for him or blame 'his fate'. He wanted to live his life to the fullest and to be treated equally as all other children. Devraj did not want anyone's assistance; he just wanted to be accepted. Understanding this was not enough to help him, but I got a direction to move forward.

During my visits, I tried to enter the space in which he was most comfortable. We discussed each other's likes and dislikes and enjoyed different games and activities. When we played ball, sometimes I could not catch it even with both my hands and there he was catching the ball every time with his single hand. Slowly, we started spending more time together and he began drawing, which he loves. In everything he did, I never felt that the inability to use one arm fully was an obstacle for him. I helped

him recognise and appreciate his strengths.

We began bonding well and felt relaxed and motivated by each other's presence. Whenever I went to his village, he would come and hold my hand and take me straight to his house and show me his drawings.

Gradually, his zeal to do more in life made me take him to the *Mohalla* Learning Activity Centre (MohLAC) so he could make new friends. This is a safe place managed by the youth of the community created by the *Eklavya* foundation for primary school students for the duration of COVID-19 for their continued engagement with meaningful learning.

Some observations

A particular incident needs mention here. At the centre one day, I had asked the children to stand in a circle. When the students were busy doing this, I observed a girl standing next to Devraj, trying to adjust her hand to hold his so that he would feel comfortable. I felt that with this naturally friendly action, she was giving a beautiful lesson that society needs to adjust its attitudes and treat persons with disabilities in the same way as they treat everyone else. Everyone has different abilities; some can dance beautifully, and some can sing melodiously. Then why are some labelled 'differently-abled'? This is a question that needs to be reviewed.

On another occasion, we sat in a group and performed some group activities which required physical movements. Devraj was a little slow, but this did not seem to bother anyone; they were all enjoying themselves.

Devraj came regularly to the centre and made new friends. He used to introduce me as his *didi* (elder sister) and soon enough, everyone around him was calling me '*Devvraj ki didi*' (Devraj's elder sister). I am happy that now others do not feel or make him feel that he will be on his own in the absence of his grandmother. Currently, Devraj continues to visit the centre and his school with his new friends. I visit him once a week and try to be there for him as much as possible.

As I mentioned before, children with disabilities do not need help as much as they need someone who empathises with them and accepts their 'difficulties' in a positive light. Encouragement, love and care from someone who believes in them and shows them their strengths can do wonders for their self-belief, self-image and, indeed, the way they live their lives – with joy and positivity. Seven different colours make a rainbow beautiful. Why is it that we want all children to be the same and be able to do the same things? There is beauty in differences, in diversity. Let us open ourselves to individual differences and accept each one as they are.



Figure 1. Author with Devraj as he learns to count using pebbles



Figure 2. Helping Devraj write at the Mohalla Learning Activity Centre

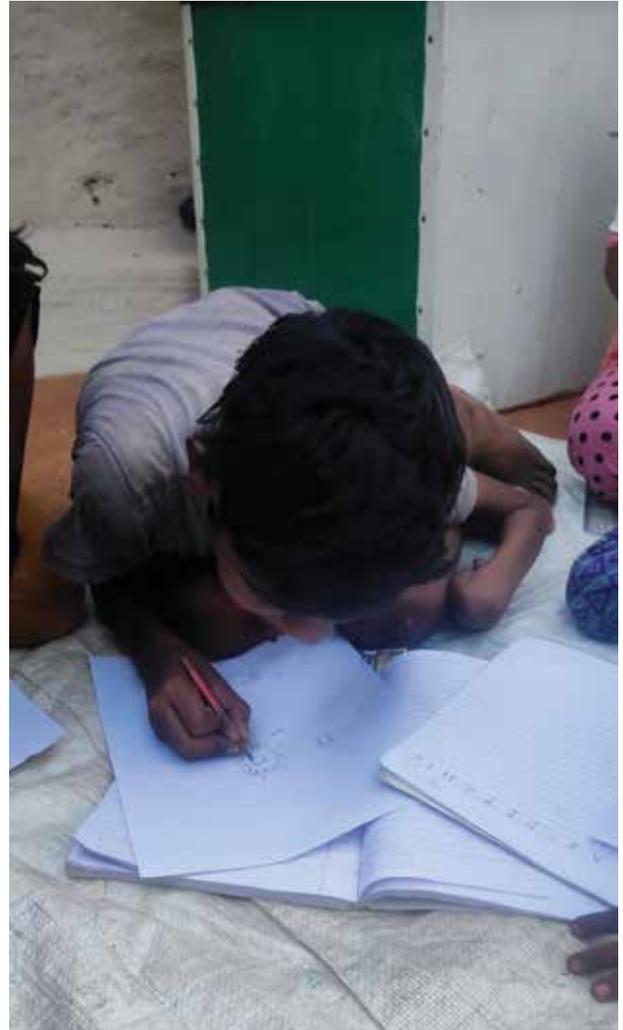


Figure 3. Devraj drawing

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

Endnotes

- i Eklavya runs a seven-month certificate course in Child Development, Special Needs and Learning – designed and conducted by the senior faculty of Eklavya and Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi. It focuses on understanding children and childhood, specifically from disadvantaged backgrounds in the Indian context.



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Building Relationships of Trust with Children

Vinita Rocha

We live in a world that seemingly does not allow trust easily. In my opinion, among the many dimensions that need to be developed in a child during her/his school years, building trust as a socio-emotional skill is one of the key ones. Trust is confidence in the integrity of a human being. It assumes that others generally have good intentions, but sometimes the circumstances in which they live, leave them with no option but to constantly operate with fear and lack of trust. Sometimes, the lack of basic resources prompts children into negative behaviour, such as a lack of respect for the self, surroundings or even misdemeanours, like theft.

Teaching values to children in schools must run alongside other developments and requires continuous and consistent effort. And even as we strive to have our children achieve academic excellence, we must ask ourselves how we can help them imbibe values and learn socio-emotional skills, such as trust. However, is it possible to teach trust as a socio-emotional skill?

A learning experience

The following anecdote was as much a learning for me as it was for the children I work with. As part of my school visits, I encourage children to visit the library, help them choose books for themselves and facilitate the issue of books in the library register. The range of books with illustrations and colours available in the library is the reason many children are interested in getting at least one book issued per week, even if they are not able to read it entirely.

My effort has been to encourage them to take these books home and feel the wonder. Initially, getting them to return the books was a challenge. But as time passed, the ongoing conversation that they could borrow another book on returning the one they had, has proved fruitful.

On two earlier weekly visits, I had refused to issue a book to Sreekanth of class IV. Sreekanth, like many others in the school, has little awareness of his self-image and surroundings and, also, little concern for his belongings. He has learning difficulties as his mother tongue differs from the medium of instruction in the school. He has few friends and the teachers too do not have a good image of him,

considering him a poor learner.

This was the third time he had approached me and this time too, I paid no attention to his prolonged plea and did not issue a book to him because of his not having returned the book he had borrowed earlier.

Sreekanth is a persistent boy. He tried his best for twenty whole minutes to convince me that he had returned his previous book *Everything Big Cats*. It seemed like he really wanted to borrow a book this time and so he repeatedly pleaded with me to believe him. I remembered an earlier occasion too when he had not been honest, so I held my ground. I told him clearly that it was very important for there to be an entry in the register and, as per the record, there was no confirmation that he had indeed returned the book he borrowed.

Repeated conversations are conducted with children to ensure accountability. Therefore, after twenty long minutes of his asking and my calm responses, Sreekanth nudged his friend to return to class with him.

I had never seen him so persistent in all my interactions and so it set me thinking about whether I had actually made a mistake; if it was indeed true that he had returned the book. I decided to recheck the register. I now noticed an entry, which had a rather unclear date of return. Deciding to give him the benefit of doubt, I picked up the book he wanted and walked to his class and said 'Sreekanth you can have this book'.

The smile on his face was one of pure joy and something that I will always remember. There was disbelief as well. It was as if he was asking, 'Have you really come for me? Are you actually acknowledging in front of the whole class that I had returned the book?' Now I felt completely convinced that the book was indeed somewhere in the library and felt bad about not having given him the benefit of doubt earlier.

The day went on as usual and when the bell rang for the day, another boy from class IV walked up to me in the corridor. He said he wanted to return a book and handed it to me. I thanked him, walked back to the library and sat down to make a last

book entry for the day. It turned out that the book was *Everything Big Cats!*

All kinds of thoughts flooded my mind once again. Had the book actually been returned by Sreekanth? Was it the other boy who had borrowed it? There was no record in the register of the book being issued out to anyone again. Could there have been a slip-up on my end? I wondered if I mistrusted Sreekanth only because of my preconceived image of him.

Questions in my head remain unanswered. The road is long, and many more conversations and incidents may bring about mutual trust and a sense of responsibility.

Lessons from this incident

Most educators focus primarily on the cognitive learning and development of children. Little is done consciously when it comes to their socio-emotional development. For holistic development to take place, teaching socio-emotional skills have to go hand-in-hand with the development of cognitive skills. It is important to put in small conscious efforts every day for change to happen.

Everyday school and incidents provide a good enough framework for all of us to have continuous conversations for the development in these areas. Cognitive and socio-emotional domains are interdependent. Sometimes it is just the little things done consistently or the little things noticed in time which can contribute immensely to the socio-emotional development of a child.

Insights I gained

In my understanding of working with children, I have tried to follow some pointers that I believe result in more trusting relationships between teachers and children.

- First and foremost, it is important to treat a child with respect and care
- Give opportunities to every child in the class to handle tasks. Otherwise, invariably, the more responsible children end up handling most of

the school tasks

- Gently introduce consequences and rewards, though not necessarily in the same order because it is possible that when a child is rewarded, it may have positive consequences
- Allow for mistakes
- Listen to the child's point of view and focus on the effort, not the outcome, that is, whether the child succeeds or not
- Reinforce positive attitudes and actions
- Have continuous conversations on why a child may be doing what he/she is doing in a particular manner
- Allocate time for reflection both to the child and the teacher
- Teachers' efforts need to be consistent over time for the children's behaviour to be moulded
- Create a threat-free environment

Change needs time and patience

The impact of our efforts may not be visible in the span of our working life, but the passing of years has taught me that the impact of a positive effort comes over a period of time, and mostly when least expected.

The breadth of our curriculum, syllabus and the number of children in each class make it difficult for a teacher to focus on all the developmental domains of every child. As educators, we must understand that love, trust and accountability between teachers and students are a two-way process and wellbeing in school means the wellbeing of both the teachers and the students.

Creating an atmosphere of wellbeing is about relearning values ourselves. If we enable children to adopt and internalise self-awareness and care, it can result in overall positive behaviour. If done in a gradual and integrated manner, it will help children understand and manage trusting relationships that will bring about positive changes in the school's culture as a whole.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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When I look back at my school years now, I realise that subjects like history, science, mathematics and literature did open up various perspectives to interpret the world around me. Sometimes it was fun to learn new concepts and sometimes I just learnt them by heart! With hindsight, I feel what remained unattended is the learning to interpret and acknowledge the world that is within me. When I was growing up, I had a lot of questions about my body, its appearance, and other complex feelings. But somehow, I never found ways to engage with these. For me, it was quite a recent discovery to understand what exactly happens to my body when I menstruate, why I feel anxious when I meet new people or how I experience anger or sadness. In this exploration, I have always felt that the process of self-awareness should have started early. I strongly believe that our school curriculum should proactively engage and create spaces for dialogue around our bodies and feelings from our early years.

This article is about my recent, brief experience of engaging with class V students of Aksharnandan School, Pune on the subject of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). It also comments on the significance of creating a safe and open space for children to talk and ask questions about different issues and curiosities about their bodies, feelings and the many things happening around them which remain largely unexplained.

What is Comprehensive Sexuality Education?

Comprehensive Sexuality Education offers a holistic perspective of sexuality and envisions creating a sharing space that gives information, skills, and opportunities to explore, imagine and, most importantly, question our notions!

‘Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.’ (Shorter version of the draft definition by

World Health Organisation, 2006).

One has to visualise CSE as a component that spirals off from the academic part of the curriculum, addressing different topics and themes that are included in various subjects. For example, while the students will learn about their different body parts from their textbooks, the CSE component could initiate a dialogue around how bodies come in different shapes and that there is no ideal body shape or size, thus, not only initiating a process of acknowledging and accepting our bodies as they are, but also bringing sensitivity to the strong stereotypes that operate around us.

In the primary years

In their early years, children make sense of the world with the help of their parents and immediate acquaintances. They keep receiving signals, clues and symbols related to the different identities that they bear. Till the time students reach class V, they have gone through and will continue to go through, many layers of socialisation. Socialising agents, mainly the media and the fashion market, prescribe a body image that is presumed ‘ideal’ and behaviour that is considered ‘cool’. This prevents children who do not conform to these standards from accepting themselves as they are. Since talking about our bodies and our feelings belong to a ‘forbidden’ zone even in front of family, there remains an absence of proper vocabulary or language to talk about our bodily experiences, discomforts, pleasure and even sexual abuse.

Storytelling to initiate dialogue

I have been developing a CSE framework which is spiral in nature and advocates that CSE should be an active part of the formal curriculum right from the early years of education. However, unless this framework is attempted within the classroom setup, necessary revision and contextualisation would be difficult. Considering this, Aksharnandan School was approached with this project. The

school which started in 1992, is a government-recognised, non-aided school from KG to class X. It has only 40 students in each class. Though the school follows the formal framework of the State Board, it has adopted innovative practices to make the curriculum relevant and linked to life.

My classroom engagement is with students from classes V and IX on a monthly basis. With the older students, I try to open up conversations in a more direct manner but with class V students, I use storytelling as a medium to have a dialogue around complex social relationships and prompts to reflect upon feelings.

Jamlo Chalti Gayi: I chose to initiate my conversation with class V students with Samina Mishra's storybook *Jamlo Chalti Gayi*. It is a real story from the pandemic, of how circumstances differed for children from different social backgrounds. The protagonist of the story, Jamlo, who works on a chilli farm in Telangana, is walking towards her home along with hundreds of other men, women and children during the pandemic. Tara is watching them on TV. While Rahul witnesses the *basti* turn silent, and on the road, Aamir is missing his teacher and classroom space as he attends online school on *Zoom*. It opened a space to acknowledge the diversity of childhoods and childhood experiences.

In the beginning, the students were not able to grasp Jamlo's social reality as it was beyond their

imagination that a child of their age could be a migrant worker. It took us some time to establish that the four characters mentioned in the story come from different social backgrounds and, hence, the social security and access to resources are also different. Given that the school is in an urban set-up and most of the students come from comparatively stable economic backgrounds, Jamlo's reality and challenges were not easy for them to relate to.

There were two things that struck me during the session. Firstly, an imperative need for narratives from different social locations that represent a wide range of experiences and perspectives, thus ensuring a more authentic representation of reality. Secondly, it is equally important to read these stories with children to sensitise them to the narrative. Sometimes, stories are mirrors, offering a view of the world that is relatable, and familiar. At other times, they open up a window, a peek into unfamiliar aspects and components of the world.

All of us have different identities, some of which are ascribed to us by societal and economic structures, such as caste, gender, class, religion, etc. All of these play a role in deciding our day-to-day choices as well as experiences. This applies to classroom spaces as well. This is where our role as a teacher or facilitator comes in – to navigate and address social, psychological and political aspects that shape our lives.



Figure 1. Reading the story, *Jamlo Chalti Gayi*.

In the second story, *Barasta Tarbooz*, written and illustrated by Quentin Greban, the protagonist Sasso, is on a journey to meet the girl he has fallen in love with. He is carrying ten watermelons as a gift for his beloved and is accompanied by his animal friends – a cow, a camel and an elephant on this journey. On the way, Sasso starts dreaming about what he and his beloved would do when they meet – these parts of the story act as prompts wherein each time Sasso dreams, he shares his assumptions of how girls are. For example, what will she do when she sees this wonderful gift? She will surely jump into his arms to kiss him. Sasso had absolutely no doubt that girls are romantic.

The students questioned Sasso's impression of girls and shared many accounts of girls acting differently. They also considered that Sasso must have seen his mother being emotional or might have heard from his friends that girls like gifts. We together highlighted these external agents that might have influenced Sasso's understanding of how girls are. We then tried to relate this to our lives and discussed different external factors that shape our views – films, friends, family members and so on. The highlight of the story is, if we closely observe Sasso, he himself has all the qualities that he thinks girls have. He is romantic, he is sensitive as he did not leave behind any of his animal friends in the middle of the journey, and he is shy. Being sensitive, romantic, and shy are soft qualities that are not restricted to one gender. They are in fact human qualities found across genders.

Another interesting point of discussion was 'can a boy and a girl be just *friends*?' Both girls and boys shared that they were teased by linking them with each other. When they were in class I or II, there was no teasing; girls and boys were just friends but that has changed with age. Many of them acknowledged the strong role of media in propagating a certain type of relationship dynamics as the only possibility between genders.

Both the stories were read out in Marathi (the home language of the students in this school) for ease of understanding and communication. Certain prompts were used during storytelling to create the atmosphere for reflection.

Towards creating safe spaces

From the above experiences, and as mentioned earlier, dialogues about the body, feelings and

different identities should start early. There has to be a vocabulary to articulate what one is feeling and experiencing about one's body as one is growing up. Such conversations steer discomfort regarding stereotypical images towards acceptance as they trigger feelings and experiences which have been repressed for long. It is this discomfort or shame that holds us back from freely expressing what we feel. For example, I had body image issues while growing up. I never felt beautiful because my body size and skin colour were different from prescribed norms. It took a long time and consistent effort to unlearn societal definitions and accept myself the way I am, and I must acknowledge it is still work-in-progress. But such issues can be addressed only when we acknowledge them in the first place. As teachers, creating such a space for students would require an internal journey of reflection first.

As teachers, we can start engaging with themes of CSE in our day-to-day classroom interactions. This does not require a separate class or extra time since we can always find ways of integrating it with other subjects. Storybooks, short films, photos, and poems function as prompts to initiate interaction around social issues. There should be resource material available in regional languages that are easily accessible to teachers as well as students. A shift that would be crucial is to have textbooks visualised from a feminist lens; that would shift the content and illustrations of the textbook making it more inclusive, holistic, and critical and thereby, organically creating room to engage with various themes of CSE, such as different social identities, inequalities, masculinity and so on.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education encourages children to embark on the journey of understanding – accepting themselves, respecting their bodies and the bodies of others around them. This will happen only when sexuality education is free from the bondage of social censure, binary limitations, and the unnecessary urge to stick to what is considered right or wrong. A continuous dialogue with students would support them to understand their bodies better, equip them to think about the consequences of their decisions, respect others' boundaries and make healthy choices and decisions in life. Mere information is not enough, what is critical is developing attitudes of non-judgement, inclusion and respect for one's own and others' choices. Creating a safe space for dialogue

can enable students to be more confident and comfortable with themselves and the possibility is

that they would offer the same enabling space to those around them.



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I observed a girl standing next to Devraj, trying to adjust her hand to hold his so that he would feel comfortable. I felt that with this naturally friendly action, she was giving a beautiful lesson that society needs to adjust its attitudes and treat persons with disabilities in the same way as they treat everyone else. Everyone has different abilities; some can dance beautifully, and some can sing melodiously. Then why are some labelled 'differently-abled'?

Shaurya Bataria, Children with Diverse Needs | What a Teacher Can Do, p 44

Keerthana Paulraj

The complex work of a teacher

Teaching is a profession that is bound by ethical conduct, complex practice, sound theoretical understanding and higher-order learning (Shulman, 1998). This often leads to 'high occupational stress' that could, in turn, potentially result in job dissatisfaction, burnout, and finally leaving the profession. These were the reasons enumerated by teachers in one urban alternative school where 10 out of 26 of them quit the same year; a phenomenon that the school has experienced every couple of years.

Teachers are often perceived as 'self-sacrificing' who, for the good of their learners, put their own needs and wellbeing behind those of their learners. The Global Teacher Status Index (2018) showed that teaching was seen as being most similar to the job of a social worker. The association of such service-oriented notions with teachers is reflected in their pay slips, in the respect accorded to them, and in the normalisation of their workload. On average, a primary school teacher in India earns INR 16,000 a month (barring teachers who fall under the 7th Pay Commission and draw a salary to the tune of INR 1,00,000 a month by the end of their careers).

Within the teaching profession, head teachers are ranked higher than secondary school teachers who are, in turn, ranked higher than primary school teachers (GTSI, 2018). This discrepancy is possibly tied to the perception that working with children in the age group of 5 to 12 years is a simple, unchallenging job that does not require skill or specialised knowledge. It often plays out in two ways – one, as neglect by higher authorities in offering support and resources to teachers; and two, as an unconscious conditioned response on behalf of teachers themselves where they may underestimate their work and, consequently, fail to see their mental, emotional and physical needs as valuable and worthy of attention. Since this workforce is primarily comprised of women, their gendered view of caregiving may further obscure their thought process.

Importance of teacher wellbeing

Teachers who are physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally healthy are more likely to demonstrate an emotional intelligence that allows them to think positively about the demands of the job and apply realistic coping strategies to effectively manage demanding emotional situations that may arise in working closely with children and adults (Vesely, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2014). Aside from this, studies have also shown that flourishing teachers also positively impact students' outcomes and achievement – psychologically and academically (Briner and Dewberry, 2007). Teacher and learner wellbeing are two sides of the same coin (Roffey, 2012). A school teacher with over 25 years of experience rightly stated that if we as a society truly cared about children's education, we would place teachers' wellbeing at the centre of our educational endeavours.

An actionable approach

How are you? What do you need to support your wellbeing? These are critical questions that head teachers, school administrators, block-level officers, policymakers and all other stakeholders can ask teachers to identify areas of intervention and support in the short- and long-term to promote their wellbeing. This can be done through feedback forms, one-on-one interviews, or even focus group discussions to begin understanding teachers' professional experiences around workload, organisational support, sense of belonging with the school, handling stressful issues, job satisfaction, physical health, student interactions and relationships.

Wellbeing emerges from nourishing the physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual dimensions of a person's health. None of these work in isolation, hence, it is imperative to implement a multidimensional approach to planning, implementation and evaluation of practices for teachers' wellbeing.

Physical wellbeing

The work of improving the wellbeing of teachers

begins with ensuring equal treatment of teachers, irrespective of their gender, type of employment, working hours, or duration of service. Providing teachers with equal support and treatment lays the foundation for a positive school environment. This is closely followed by adequate monetary compensation to meet the rising cost of living, which should include the fulfilment of their basic physical needs and enabling them to have a savings plan. Workshops to understand financial management, and one's relationship with money would further empower teachers to make informed decisions.

At an operational level, one must take into consideration a teacher's time, that is, the time spent in teaching, preparing, assessing, attending meetings, carrying out administrative tasks and attending to their professional development. Having teacher representatives on the administrative board can enable a more nuanced decision-making process as they would be able to highlight the needs and realities of teachers and prevent the pitfalls of top-down leadership models.

In one urban private school, the coordinator got every teacher to list the number of teaching hours they would need to finish their syllabus, and the number of hours they would require for the preparation work. This then acted as a guide for the preparation of the timetable. In another instance, a school offered a teacher more paid sick leave than was permissible in the leave policy just by virtue of their care ethic that did not permit a systemic process to overrule a human need for which it was created in the first place. Such steps enable teachers in their journey of finding a balance between their personal and professional lives, but which can often be blurred in the teaching profession.

A primary school teacher once reflected, 'I always have lunch in the classroom with my students. I don't get any time away from them.' It is important to keep in mind the physical space in which a teacher has to work, breathe, reflect, and interact with colleagues and students. One way could be to arrange furniture imaginatively in staffrooms to accommodate their need for both 'quiet time' and conversations. For instance, having a small circle of chairs in the centre, as well as desks turned towards the windows. Curating conversations around these initiatives may enable more effective use of the space and allow for the emergence of new ideas.

To have respect for teachers is to see their need for time and space and take action towards co-creating workspaces that foster their wellbeing.

In a few schools, staff meetings often begin or close with physical activities of different kinds - a game of badminton or throwball, some movement and stretches or even warmup indoor classroom games. These are great ways to unwind and build connections.

Cognitive wellbeing

As Leiter and Cooper (2017) said, 'It is not good enough to do no harm; responsible employers design work to enhance employees' health and fulfilment at work'. One way may be to co-create a list of roles and responsibilities for each teacher with the teacher at the start of every academic year to enable them to work with a greater sense of ownership and passion.

Consistent opportunities for professional development to enable unlearning and relearning often fosters a teacher's cognitive wellbeing. Professional development sessions are most effective when they are in alignment with teachers' needs. Aside from asking teachers directly, it may be useful for school leaders to notice patterns in questions and concerns arising in meetings, informal conversations and classroom observations. This may then form the basis for designing professional development workshops for them.

The workshops must also take into consideration teachers' autonomy in terms of content, methodology and logistics, like giving them the freedom to make informed choices about which workshops to attend as this is often a sign of trust and confidence in their professional practice. Autonomy in their work-related practices may include independence to make decisions regarding the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, classroom management, parent interactions and self-development.

Professional development can also be made fun and accessible through the use of films, storybooks and case studies on classroom teaching-learning. Teachers can read or watch and discuss together what they observed – collaborating, exchanging ideas and sharing expertise and, as a result, also attempting new methods and ways of teaching.

Another professional development opportunity can be using *Post-its* with distinct prompts on the walls of the staffroom or common staff areas. For example, 'Attending a lecture', 'Writing a reflection

about a class', 'Observing a colleague's class', 'Sharing a lesson plan and eliciting feedback', 'Offering book recommendations', among other interesting possibilities. Teachers may be encouraged to make time to do at least two of these fortnightly or monthly and share their experiences on a pin-up board.

Group and one-on-one mentorship programmes empower both newcomers and experienced teachers to observe and repair specific aspects of their classroom teaching-learning engagement. For instance, a novice class-teacher of a group of twenty 10-year-olds expressed that she would often be overwhelmed with the volume of content preparation and classroom management. The space her mentor offered her to process her stress, and then move towards taking action, enabled her to improve her confidence, level of satisfaction in the classroom and ability to feel good. Her mentor would share insights, and pedagogic tools in the form of stories, songs, exercises, and concepts to meet differential student needs and create an overall transformative classroom teaching-learning experience.

In the weekly meetings of one rural alternative school, time is allotted to any one teacher in every meeting to share challenging experiences they may be having with a particular student or group of students. This is then followed by an open discussion where other teachers, voluntarily, ask further probing questions and offer suggestions or even additional support to help them address the issue.

Communicating decisions with clarity, transparency and compassion and allowing teachers to counter question will help to create an environment where teachers experience freedom in being an individual as well as a member of the community. It is also essential that a culture is built with regard to the mode of communication. For example, setting up norms for *WhatsApp* or email groups to ensure that messages are not sent after a certain time on weekdays and weekends, unless very urgent. It is observed that an open, two-way communication with school leaders that includes demonstrating respect for teachers' professional judgments, recognising and celebrating professional expertise and achievements, allowing autonomy and trusting professional decisions made by teaching staff are crucial for their wellbeing (Le Cornu, 2013).

Emotional and spiritual wellbeing

Making teachers feel important and respected for the work they do sets the stage for promoting a teacher's emotional wellbeing. Simple *thank-yous* and can go a long way to show them that their work is being recognised.

An alternative-school teacher highlighted an exercise followed at their official meetings: They would begin by asking about each-others' wellbeing and sharing a philosophical or psychological perspective as part of a reflective discussion. This would then be followed by discussions on the matters at hand. Such practices lean towards viewing 'teachers as people, whose teaching is bound up with their lives, their biographies, with the kinds of people they have become (Fullan and Hargreaves).

In the emotional and spiritual wellbeing sphere, consistent reflective socio-emotional exercises offer teachers the space to find the grammar for their emotions, learn to regulate them and thereafter be more present for themselves and their loved ones from a more aware and expansive space. This would include practices to articulate their trauma (if any), need for connection and belonging, conditioned responses, strengths, weaknesses, different emotions, values, sense of purpose, or even opinions; and to strengthen their capacity to understand their loved ones through the lens of these different aspects. The practices may also focus on deepening their ability to communicate in conflict, build resilience, practice self-compassion and kindness towards the world, explore different means of self-care, relax with movement, music or poetry; or even express the self through art and literature. Self-care strategies, such as mindfulness meditation, exercise, or even setting personal goals are skills that can and need to be taught and practised.

This deep dive into bringing teachers' wellbeing to the forefront may begin with getting teachers to reflect on questions about how healthy they are, and what is affecting their health positively or negatively. It may also be done through worksheets with statements related to their wellbeing. For instance, asking them to think about what steps they can take to protect or enhance a particular aspect of their wellbeing or even what dreams they have as a teacher. One may also incorporate journaling exercises that help teachers explore their conditioning about teaching and education itself, followed by small group conversations around

what comes up, will help to initiate the process of accepting oneself before working towards altering narratives.

Social wellbeing

The presence of professional communities where teachers can interact with fellow teachers to share the joys and difficulties of teaching-learning experiences, build connections, offer each other support in learning and in finding inspiration, fosters teachers' social wellbeing. Sharing each other's experiences can help them arrive at behaviours and strategies that are effective (best practices).

A teacher commented with joy about the pleasure community gatherings brought to parents, children and teachers. However, these events are enjoyable as long as they do not fall on teachers as just an additional responsibility but are a convergence of enthusiasm from all stakeholders. They give teachers a sense of ownership and belonging, and of being partners in the growth and development of each student.

In summary

Wellbeing practices open up the space to negotiate with social structures and emotional patterns that may otherwise lie in an unattended space. However,

being realistic in this journey would mean being acutely aware that macro-processes and structures determine some of our private experiences. Having said that, wellbeing is a shared responsibility which means that, alongside systemic intervention, it also requires efforts on the teacher's part (Mercer, Gregerson, 2020). This latter aspect can be a slippery ground since wellbeing itself is not a skill or theme that is often taught or talked about in Indian households. Initiatives at an institutional level may never penetrate the minds of some teachers, by virtue of their own conditioning.

Offering data or research studies on the impact of physical, socio-emotional and spiritual wellbeing practices may help to challenge their beliefs and nudge teachers towards seeking wellbeing for themselves. It may also be useful to start the engine with a few teachers who may be mildly receptive to the ideas of self-care and use them to build momentum through peer encouragement.

It is necessary to begin this work of change at a pace that feels steady, enduring and resilient based on the resources available. After all, it is only through small steps that one can make a difference in the lives of teachers, and therefore, children.

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Mindfulness Practice for Teachers' Wellbeing

Manoj Nigam

A wise man was asked, 'What is anger?' He gave a beautiful answer, 'It is the punishment you give yourself for somebody else's mistakes.' When I talk to myself and the people around me, it seems that we all go through anger or stress from time to time. While going through these, most people withdraw and do not talk to anyone; they feel miserable and unhappy, and sometimes, they harm themselves or others. Depression becomes a state of mind if mental stress continues for a long time. Extremely dire circumstances can also result in disastrous incidents.

Status of mental health and need for awareness

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression will become the second-largest mental health disease in the world in the coming years. A 2017 reportⁱ by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) states that one out of every seven Indians is suffering from some mental disorder. According to the National Crime Records Bureau data, 11,396 children under the age of 18 years committed suicide in 2020ⁱⁱ and 10,730 in 2021.ⁱⁱⁱ In the year 2020, 1, 53,052 people lost their lives all over the country, while according to the figures in 2021, this number is 1, 64,063. The magnitude of the situation can be gauged from these figures. It is believed that life expectancy has decreased significantly since World War II. One of the main reasons for this is the COVID-19 pandemic.

It will take a long time for us to come out of the difficult situations that the pandemic has created. Everyone, including administration and governments, is aware of the need to work with children and teachers on mental health. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^{iv} also states that when children are malnourished or unhealthy, they are not able to learn optimally. Hence, the focus will now be on the nutrition and health (including mental health) of the children. Basic training in health, including mental health, will be included in the curriculum.

Teachers have played an important role in reviving the education system during the pandemic.^v However, the pandemic has had an impact on

teachers as well, both physically and mentally. When physical issues surface doctors are consulted, but mental health issues are rarely brought up in our society, though it is generally established that mental stress has negative effects on our bodies as well as our minds, emotions, and life aspirations. Creating awareness about mental health is essential in these times.

Since the early days of the pandemic and the lockdown, *Eklavya* has been taking up health awareness initiatives at various levels. We have been trying to continuously interact with teachers and children on issues of mental health. After the second wave of the epidemic, *Eklavya* engaged with many teachers, educational workers, D Ed students, and children regarding mindfulness through online and offline modes. These sessions were made interesting and interactive with the use of poems, books, and short films, along with various other activities.

Mindfulness and awareness

Through the sessions with teachers, an attempt was made to talk about the need for mental health and experience mindfulness activities.

Mindfulness is a therapy through which we create awareness of the happenings in and around us. It is a way of paying attention to the present moment, wherever we are. The present moment has to be felt and lived to the fullest. Otherwise, most of the time, we are under mental pressure either due to the sad events of our past or worry about the future. Dr Sumit Rai, a Psychiatrist, says that one should be aware of one's surroundings.

It is believed that with regular practice of mindfulness techniques, we can learn to be happy. Mindfulness helps us connect to the present moment and accept it. This eliminates the fear of what may happen or the disappointment with what did not happen according to our expectations. When we accept the truth, adverse situations do not bother us. We cannot change situations, but with regular

practice of mindfulness, we can learn how to respond to these situations. These activities help us slow down the pace of our thoughts and feelings.

Introduction to mindfulness

During the sessions, when the participants were asked what people do when they are stressed, they mentioned crying, sitting quietly in a room with the door closed, scolding younger members of the family, even beating them up, going out of the house, listening to music, trying to write down their feelings, painting, speaking with a close friend, shouting and feeling angry with self.

The session with children or teachers begins with a book called 'The Rabbit Listened' by Cori Doerrfeld. In this illustrated book, a child named Taylor painstakingly builds a tower using wooden blocks. He is extremely saddened when it suddenly breaks. One by one his friends come to console him and suggest things to do, but he does not want to talk to anyone or do what they ask him to. By and by, everyone leaves him, and he becomes lonely. At last, a rabbit comes to him and quietly sits close to him so that Taylor can feel the warmth of its body. There is silence between the two for a long time and then Taylor says, 'Please stay with me.' Slowly, Taylor begins to talk and the rabbit listens to him. Taylor shouts, remembers and plans and the rabbit listens till Taylor puts the fallen blocks back into the box and decides to create a tower again! The participants discuss the characters and the situation as they listen/narrate the story. What would you do if you were Taylor's friend? Have you ever been in this mental state? They ask about each other's experiences.

The right kind of atmosphere is created in the sessions when sources, such as WHO's powerful animation film 'I have a black dog',^{vi} Vinod Kumar Shukla's poem '*Hatasha se ek vyakti baith gaya tha*' (हताशा से एक व्यक्ति बैठ गया था), and *Eklavya's* publication '*Tipik pa bharr...*' (टिपिक पां भर्र...)' are used.

Mindfulness activities

We discuss with the participants how our senses always work in the present. Our feelings, guiding us to move forward in this complex world, teach us to live in the present and in this very moment. After this discussion, the activities of seeing, hearing, feeling, and observing what is around us are carried

out using all our senses. For example, closing our eyes for ten minutes and listening attentively to the sounds around us – what are the kinds of sounds that we hear? Some are near, some far away, some loud, some soft – just listening to the sounds without any preconceived notions. After ten to fifteen minutes of this attentive listening activity, all participants are asked to share their experiences. Most of the participants find this activity quite simple but they admit that they have never listened to the surrounding sounds so carefully. The ticking of a clock, the trickling of water, the sound of birds, the bell of a bicycle, the sound of a car applying brakes, the whispers, the sound of breathing, etc. Each participant has a different listening experience. The magic happens when they are asked whether there was any worry or anxiety when they were listening to these sounds so attentively. Most of them say that there was not. When asked how they felt immediately after, they replied, peaceful, relaxed, good, and free from worries.

Participants narrate their experiences, which are discussed and observations are shared. Activities, such as paying attention to the breath, observing carefully, and paying attention to the stretching of the skin and body, are also experienced. Writing down the experiences also develops clarity. Participants report the benefits of mindfulness activities as relieving stress, increasing concentration, improving emotional stability, understanding others, reducing anger, and feelings of peace and happiness.

During the session, the participants are involved in the activities, but later on, some of them feel more at ease with us and share their personal problems and experiences. They are advised to talk to their teachers, friends, and family members about issues that are troubling them or to seek help from a professional counsellor or psychiatrist if needed.

Conclusion

It is advisable to have a counsellor in the school to talk to the children about the issues that they may be facing. In some extreme cases of distress, they may be guided to speak on the Child Helpline number 1098. Mindfulness sessions of 10–15 minutes can be held daily in school along with art activities that allow children to express their emotions. The school management, teachers and the counsellor must reassure children that they are not alone; that in any situation, they will always have the cooperation and support of their teacher

and school. Sessions should also be conducted for teachers to develop their counselling support skills. It would be a great service to humanity today if all of us help and support each other. We must look

within ourselves and around us to be ready to seek and extend help. Even if the people around us do not speak, listen to and understand their silence and reach out to those who seem vulnerable.

Endnotes

- i One in seven persons in India suffers from a mental disorder, finds ICMR survey- The New Indian Express
- ii https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/adsj_reports_previous_year/Table%202.0.pdf
- iii <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/node/3722>
- iv https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
- v <https://news.un.org/hi/story/2021/10/1047902>
- vi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc>



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Approaching Wellness through Dialogue

Nupur Rastogi

Teachers do their best to make the classroom learning experience for children constructive and positive. They try to ensure that conflict does not occur, which means maintaining an environment where children do not get involved in any conversation that can potentially lead to conflict. This includes forming a shared understanding about refraining from discussing uncomfortable issues. This orientation starts in primary classes and reflects in their behaviour and thoughts by the time they reach secondary education.

Time and again, scholars have expressed concern over the scope for children from oppressed communities to express perplexities about their daily life experiences, which are rooted in the prejudices, stereotypes, taboos, and discriminations they or their family and community members experience daily. This article discusses, firstly, the need to create spaces for children to talk about problematic and conflicting issues within the classroom and secondly, the role of teachers in facilitating such spaces and makes a few suggestions about the dynamics of these spaces.

Creating safe spaces

Students feeling safe and comfortable in expressing themselves without fear, threat, and discomfort is vital in ensuring their wellbeing within a classroom. There are students from different socio-economic backgrounds in the classroom. In creating a safe space, a teacher makes sure that all these children talk to each other respectfully; nobody uses disparaging words which they may have heard in their homes or communities, there is no discrimination and children articulate their grievances without feeling threatened or uncomfortable.

And even though some children in the classroom might not experience this stigmatisation in school, they may experience it in the community. Similarly, some children do not use disparaging words in class but hear their parents using them for a particular community/communities at home. In such cases, creating a safe space does not seem enough. What

needs to be done to bring out in the open these issues that are taboo; that create discomfort and conflict in some children?

Brave spaces: the next step

If a 'safe space' is the vision of a regular classroom, a 'brave space' is an area a teacher creates at regular intervals with and for students where they can talk about their daily-life experiences. For example, a classroom should be a 'safe' space where the students feel included, irrespective of their differences. It creates an environment where students can make mistakes and learn from them without being judged. It is devoid of fear and full of support. The same classroom could create a 'brave' space at periodic intervals, at least initially, to talk about conflicting issues. A brave space would enable students to talk about, for example, a casteist slur inflicted on them, the discrimination they experience belonging to a religious minority, and the humiliation they undergo because their parents have a certain occupation. This also becomes the space for students to join a dialogue with these issues and learn to talk about them. It removes biases, prejudices, and stereotypes they hold for other cultures or groups as part of society. The choice of what and how much they want to share rests with the children. This initiative helps children from marginalised communities recognise their experiences with others; voice and reflect on these.

Let me illustrate this with an example of how complicated issues bother children even in the primary classes. In 2015, I was teaching class IV, and it was three days before Christmas. I wanted to allow my students the chance to express concerns that were otherwise prohibited, as per the school's protocol. So, I suggested to my class that we write letters to Santa Claus. Knowing that Santa gives gifts, why not write two things that make us most happy and two things that worry us to our core that we cannot tell our parents, teachers, or any other adult?

Those letters brought up the deepest concerns

of my students -- poverty in the family, domestic violence, dropping out of school, molestation and abuse, extra-marital relationships of parents and gender discrimination at home. Until that day, I had no knowledge of these aspects of the lives of my 10-year-old, class IV students. This made me think about what was lacking in my classroom because of which they could not share their apprehensions with anyone. Did it affect their overall wellbeing? Did they think about it while studying, sleeping, and during meals? How were they dealing with it?

What would a classroom look like if one started discussing these issues within the school? Was I equipped to handle any situation that might arise from such a discussion? What were the precautions and preconditions for talking about these issues? When would I finish my syllabus, test preparation and more? These questions are rooted in the limitations of the current educational system, and one needs to find ways to navigate these challenges within the classroom. Creating *brave spaces* can be one of these.

(1) ^{class} Santa please come my ~~prof~~ parents for Delhi. And my all family my come to Delhi. My chacha not hitting to me and buaa also not hitting any my father lot of rupes. My father not take a rupee in a udhar please Santa class.

2) My sister not say a abuse and reading a lot of and my sister is Krishna and Radhika Krishna ~~teach~~ is a not class monitor but please Krishna is a class monitor to Santa Claus please my sister ~~not~~ is a work hard She is pass on final exam.

3) And I am also say a to you for my father not drink please Santa clause please.

4) My grandfather and grandmother not a die and my grandfather not a money is less for to is not working and my grandfather take my grandfather take to not res ident.

Figure 1A. A child's letter to Santa Claus

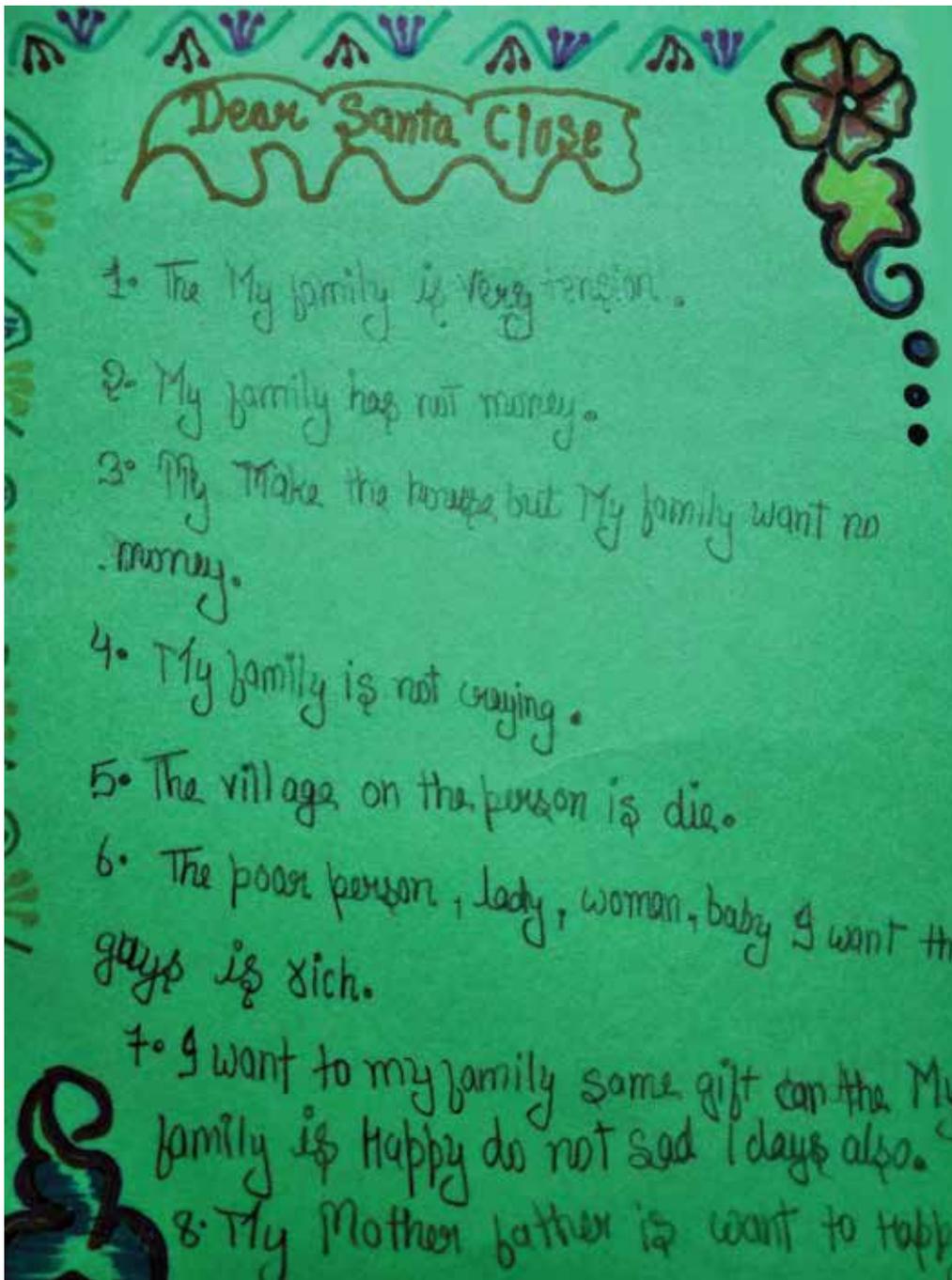


Figure 1B. Another child's letter to Santa Claus

Periodic Dialogic Circles

One of the other solutions can be using Periodic Dialogic Circles (PDCs) in which the students and the teacher sit together and talk about matters that concern the students. The authority of students' knowledge is valued highly in these sessions, so they get to choose issues that matter to them. The PDCs highlight the importance of dialogue in supporting *brave spaces* and in reducing prejudices against other people/communities. Following are a few precautions and preconditions for creating PDCs.

1. There is no goal or agenda in PDCs

Agendas act as barriers to a free flow of thoughts. For example, an agenda of sharing stories for fifteen minutes, followed up by a discussion, etc; could get mechanical for students, like work they need to finish in an hour. This could also act as a pressure on students who might not be comfortable with sharing and talking. Instead, students should talk about anything that matters to them. It is likely that they may not directly or immediately come to the issue but after a few initial PDCs, they may open up. It

is not the number, the goal, or the outcome that measures the success of PDCs but the slow and gradual process of sharing, which creates the setting for deep dialogues. The facilitator will have to be both patient and persevering.

2. *Meeting at regular intervals*

In the book 'On Dialogue,' the author David Bohm recommends arranging dialogues at fixed intervals. He writes that if such a group meets at fixed intervals, it lessens the dependence on the facilitator, and participants learn to get into a dialogue by themselves. This is an orientation towards empowering oneself with the process of dialogue without outside support. This could be fixed for every Saturday morning or once in two weeks. It is the regularity which will help them to start talking about thought-provoking issues.

3. *Topics for dialogue vary*

They could include friendship, anger, punishment, goodness, justice, religion, caste, sex or body image. The facilitator has to be strong and stable ensuring that the social location does not influence (or intimidate) how and what children share, especially those belonging to oppressed communities. The facilitator also needs to be careful of becoming the authority figure in that circle and know when to lead from behind.

4. *Large groups for diversity*

Forming a large group of about 20 members allows for diversity, that is, the exchange of diverse thoughts in the group. A facilitator can decide to have two groups of twenty students each in a class of forty students. This also depends on the resources and the classroom context. For example, there may not be enough space in the classroom to form a circle, or the school may have a dearth of teachers because of which the class cannot be divided to form two PDCs. In such situations, one will have to make an extra effort by calling a group of students early in the morning or asking them to stay back for an hour after school.

5. *Active listening is a precondition*

The skill of 'active listening', which is a way of communication, is an essential precondition of PDCs. A PDC will not work if there are opportunities only for talking, but nobody listens. Sharing concerns is a process of

meaning-making, which is unsuccessful without listening to what the other person is saying. Active listening means showing respect towards the person speaking so that they know that the listener is engaged with what they are saying. For children in a primary classroom, the skill of active listening could simply be understood as being attentive to what the other person is saying and showing respect towards them.

6. *Teacher as facilitator*

A teacher knows the students well, meeting them on regular basis. It is expected that she also knows the community well. She is responsible for making the classroom a safe space. She is also an authority figure for students. Her role as facilitator is crucial in creating a brave space. While donning the hat of the facilitator, she becomes extra cautious of her being the authority figure. As a facilitator, she does not have to control the group or expect them to behave and talk in a certain way. She does not have to assign work or have expectations. She has to be open to diverse perspectives, act as a catalyst in the free flow of discussion and resist the urge to intervene or correct. For example, in a follow-up, self-level-reflection session, her role would be to encourage students to reflect on: 'How did I feel while sharing a concern? How did I feel while listening to someone? What was I thinking?' This would help students consolidate their experience from the session. It is also the facilitator's job to ensure that there has been readiness for the discussion and that no judgemental statements are made.

7. *Encouragement is key*

In her book, *Children as Philosophers: Learning through Inquiry and Dialogue*, the author, Joanna Haynes, shares an anecdote that might help us here. She writes, 'In a review, following a term's work in an infant class, one seven-year-old said, "I've enjoyed philosophy a lot, but I'd like to know what Kathryn thinks." Kathryn had barely spoken in the group, and others expressed a similar wish. These comments from her peers signalled to Kathryn that her friends were willing to listen to her, and their interest in her gave her some gentle encouragement to make her views known.' Many times, students do not speak up, and one might mistake their diffidence for unwillingness to share. In such situations, encouragement from facilitators and peers helps.

A student might not be sharing because of some self-esteem issue; or because she or he is scared; or because he or she feels that his/her views are not worth sharing. The facilitator has to create an environment of encouragement and sharing among peers.

8. *Neither consensus nor resolution*

The process of dialogue does not have to be mistaken as a conflict-resolution building exercise. It is also not that all the students would come to a common ground and agree with each other. The PDCs evolve as a process. It is possible that all such consensus-building, conflict-resolution and problem-solving may or may not happen as part of the process, but that is anyway, not the objective.

Scaffolding through third-party material

In the initial few PDCs, it will not be easy for students or facilitators to open up and begin a dialogue. The facilitator could take the help of third-party material to provide a starting point. For example, the facilitator can read out a story or a newspaper

report. They can also show artefacts, movies, documentaries and photographs; play music or share their own experience on issues that are closely related to students' lives. These materials will provide the scaffolding and help children use their imagination and experiences without revealing too many personal details or identities which they may not be comfortable disclosing.

Suggestions for PDCs

The age of the students in a primary classroom also decides the material the facilitator uses. Here are some examples.

Primary classroom - age group 6-9 years

Professor Heid Leganger- Krogstad suggests the use of stories; children at this age can be asked to investigate their understanding of the narrative further by being asked:

- Who do you want to be in the story?
- Why do you think the persons x and y in the story acted as they did?
- What do you think they thought before they acted and after?



Figure 2. Basic representation of a dialogic circle

- What would have happened if (...)?
- What would you have done if you were person x?

For example, the book *Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why* is about a boy raising questions about his daily experiences with caste discrimination. For the Initial PDCs, the facilitator could use such stories and their illustrations as a read-aloud to involve the children in the discussion and follow this up with the questions above. This would create space for the children to discuss the issue without discussing their personal stories.

Primary classroom - age group 10-13 years

Professor Heid Leganger-Krogstad suggests that, at this age, children are interested in factual knowledge and see the need to organise the information they hold into systems and structures. Reading art and symbols could act as mediating tools to help students articulate this need to systematise. They learn to understand the interpretation, know that all the answers are equally valid and learn to listen to their classmates. They focus on observation – the material, colour, shape, size, centre, periphery, focal point, and technique; no observation is neglected or rejected.

For example, the teacher could ask them to interpret the various symbols for Peace - ☺, 🕊, 🕎, 🌈.

They gather around, observe and interpret, some might recognise colours, some recognise shapes, some look for a story, while some might relate to something they already know. This exercise helps during the initial PDCs in letting students know that they can voice their opinions without fearing the right or wrong of their responses. There will be no judgments as there are no correct answers.

Recognition of experiences

Classrooms need safe and brave spaces to build a holistic environment for children. Periodic Dialogic Circles are one of the many ways of creating such spaces. Teachers can explore new ways depending on the context in which their classrooms are situated. The idea is to look for ways that contribute to the children's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The idea is to make a space for them to speak about feeling marginalised and listen to others and themselves; it is to recognise their experiences and inform them that they have a public voice to speak and make people hear them. It also shows trust in their personal experiences and knowledge: to ensure that they grow without fear and with a voice of their own that they are unafraid to assert.

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Building an Inclusive and Safe School Culture

Pranalee Sharma

'I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the Gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door.'

The above vignette is taken from *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), an autobiographical account of Omprakash Valmiki's birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the 1950s. The author here shares his feelings about being excluded from a school event. It clearly depicts the anguish he had to endure as a child due to practices that created an unsafe and unwelcoming environment for children like him. Discriminatory school practices based on a child's abilities, caste, gender, language, community or religion can lead to poor social and emotional skills as well as poor academic performance. It is easy to understand how feeling unsafe physically, socially and emotionally can actually hinder one's ability to listen, think clearly and learn. Whether we feel safe or not influences our emotional experiences which in turn influences our social experiences.

An inclusive and safe school culture

We are familiar with the term 'inclusive education', a constantly-evolving concept. With the advent of both, large-scale programmes (such as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) aimed at the universalisation of elementary education and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) of 2009, our schools are increasingly becoming multi-ethnic with children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This would require restructuring school cultures, policies and practices to facilitate the participation of all students, including those with disabilities, children from linguistic minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, that is, children belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and girls (NCERT).

It is necessary to shift from a narrow and mechanistic view of inclusive education to one that is beyond the inclusion of children with disabilities alone and takes into account wider aspects of exclusion across the country. Inclusive schools do not view individual differences as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching the teaching and learning processes. The idea behind inclusive education should be to question and challenge homogeneity and include culturally plural communities. For these policies and acts to be effectively implemented, it is vital for the school culture to be safe and inclusive.

Safety in schools would mean a safe environment for a child to look forward to; an environment that supports learning. School safety efforts would take cognisance of all hazards that might affect the wellbeing of children. This would include safeguarding from abuse, violence, accidents, socio-emotional issues, etc. The school is required to provide a positive environment with no punishment, bullying, harassment, intimidation or use of any derogatory language within the school premises. When children feel at risk, they may not be able to focus on learning, or they might stop attending school altogether.

Creating a socially and emotionally safe school

Creating such an environment requires continuous and comprehensive attention to the infrastructure, the health and hygiene systems and the psycho-social dynamics within the school with the intention of focusing on safety and security as a prerequisite for learning. School authorities need to have clear procedures of conduct for teachers and school staff, their professional training and effective classroom management. Promoting a socially and emotionally safe environment in school enhances children's ability to learn, build friendships and lead a healthy life.

We often see that a safe school plan focuses mainly on physical safety, such as infrastructure, accessibility of resources etc. Creating a truly effective, comprehensive plan would require processes across the school system where teachers, students, school staff and parents work and learn together about how safe they feel and collaboratively develop a vision of how they want the school to be, developing a positive behavioural system and developing themes that shape vocabulary and reflection (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

A complex set of factors come together to make a school safe and inclusive – social, family, and community. Besides these three interactive factors, one most crucial factor is the school environment, including rules, hidden norms, relationships between students and adults etc., which influences the healthy development of a child across all domains. There can be three overlapping interventions that can enable teachers and school administrators to create a safe and inclusive school.

1. *Developing a comprehensive school plan*

How often do we hear the term ‘zero tolerance’ in schools and colleges? Have you noticed how it is being advertised as a positive policy? Zero tolerance is the response to the misbehaviour of students in schools which means that the school will severely punish students for any kind of misbehaviour. Usually, it ends in rustication from the school. When such a response to misbehaviour becomes a school policy, the school staff, teachers, principals or parents also feel the need to comply and not raise any questions. The assumption behind the zero-tolerance policy is that the removal of disruptive students from schools will make the school a safe place for others. But does the policy actually achieve its goals? These schools not only fail to make schools safer but also increase the incidence of dropouts and problem behaviour (Farberman, 2006). More attention needs to be paid to a system that allows everyone from school staff to parents to the community to identify areas of concern, find the resources and skills, plan for positive change and then evaluate the progress.

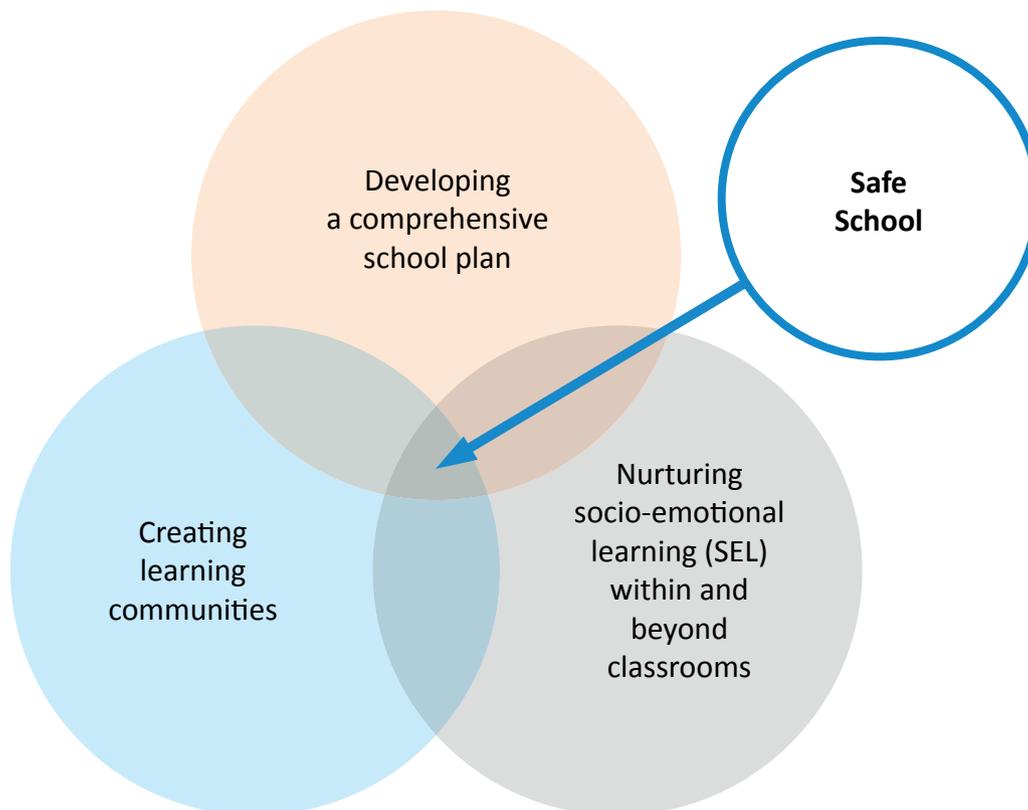


Figure 1. Framework for an inclusive and safe school



Figure 2. Steps to achieve inclusion in schools

It is crucial to look into all the school practices that can lead to discrimination, such as task divisions during mid-day meals, or selecting teams during sports or seating arrangements. There can be a series of steps that one can look into in conjunction with parents and the community to address these concerns.

a. Prepare for inclusion

Establishing urgency is crucial to gain cooperation from all the school members. We often see that data from the National Achievement Study (NAS)ⁱ, or any other large-scale study helps senior functionaries to take appropriate decisions regarding learning gaps or the learning loss faced by students. Similarly, data on how and why students are dropping out, the emotional state of students, their relationship with the teachers etc., can be collected and presented to establish the urgency. A team can be built with all the relevant stakeholders in the process. The team should include people who share the vision, who have the authority to take and implement decisions, who have the expertise in the domain and those who have demonstrated leadership in the school.

b. Implement changes

The first and most important step towards implementation is communicating the vision of the plan. A baseline study can begin with a self-assessment tool administered by the school principal to understand the current level of inclusivity and scope of growth, the barriers to change and the findings can be used to build an action plan. The plan should include measurable objectives, tasks to achieve these objectives, data collection tools and methods, a progress check for each objective and an individual responsible to oversee each objective. For example, if the aim is to ensure collaborative teaching and planning, then the objectives could be: to use a variety of models of delivery to meet the needs of students and to avail professional development

opportunities regarding instructional strategies for diverse students. Short-term wins can motivate individuals to work with zeal towards a goal and can be the stepping stones to greater success.

c. Sustain inclusion

A critical step to sustain inclusion is to reflect on the work done and to identify what works and what does not. That information can be used to make improvements. With time, the professional learning of the team also begins to expand through seminars, workshops, sharing and reading. Identifying the professional needs of each teacher and other school staff can help in organising effective professional development activities. Documenting the changes can guide the school processes and procedures. To sustain inclusion in a school, administrative involvement and support are as critical as the teaching-learning process inside a classroom.

2. *Nurturing socio-emotional learning within and beyond the classroom*

We know that learning does not take place only in the formal setting of a classroom; it takes place in the playgrounds, during midday meals and morning assemblies, in the corridors, in the library etc. It cannot be force-fitted inside a school curriculum.

The recognition of schools being central in nurturing socio-emotional learning (SEL) in students needs to be at a structural level and at the individual level. Some believe that SEL is woven within subject domains and can be taught while transacting the curriculum. It is believed that no separate programme is required since all the required skills can be learnt directly through daily experiences, regular conversations, and relationships. But it is essential to provide a supportive environment for such teachings to be impactful even within the existing school curriculum. Without a socially and emotionally supportive environment, the school curriculum is empty and can have no significant impact on the development of children.

In my experience, special classes in SEL are not as effective as an integrated approach to it in the daily teaching practice. A teacher who gives children opportunities to express themselves, share their experiences and participate in classroom decisions is not only helping them achieve the stated learning outcomes but also nurturing several socio-emotional skills, such as collaboration, ethical decision-making, problem-solving etc. A teacher may ask pairs of students to answer this question: 'How would you like me to make sure that I listen to your questions?' As the students discuss this, they also discuss which approach would be fair and not hurt anyone's feelings. The teacher and the students can mutually decide on one method and follow that. Another teacher comes into the classroom and reminds the students of the protocols to be followed inside a class. Both practices communicate expected behaviour, but the first teacher showed respect towards the students by demonstrating a concern for their feelings and providing them with an opportunity to determine rules for the class. This method is more effective than the traditional one of announcing and reminding the children of the rules of the classroom in which they have no say. Both groups may follow similar processes but the first one helps students develop a sense of responsibility.

Developing a safe and inclusive classroom also helps students to take risks or make mistakes without any fear of punishment or humiliation. During classes when teachers show their own vulnerable sides or display their own emotions through a personal story or personal experience it deepens the bonds between the teacher and the students which is crucial for developing positive socio-emotional skills. Younger children particularly are more interested in listening to their teacher's childhood stories.

Circle time can be a very effective pedagogical tool to build a sense of community. This activity allows students to get ready for the day, and to learn. In situations where children do not find any space to voice their concerns or thoughts at home, they can feel included in the school space. It is imperative to follow a protocol (decided in collaboration with the students) to not take information outside the classroom and to respect each other.

3. *Creating learning communities*

Learning communities are groups of individuals

who come together regularly to share their work, learnings, reflections, and suggestions. Creating a platform to share successful practices is effective in identifying the problems and resolving them to integrate SEL practices into existing processes. Some ways to build learning communities are as follows:

- Conversation circles that include all voices of teachers and school administrators on specific SEL topics such as how to improve student-teacher relationships. It can follow the rules of focused group discussions
- Study groups in which teachers read and discuss SEL-related texts, materials and research
- Action research groups that reflect on the implications of SEL-related activities. It can also research the impact of the work done on the ground and take steps based on the reflections
- Online communication platforms on SEL teaching practices, such as *WhatsApp*, discussion forums, conference calls, video calls
- Learning journal with articles by teachers can be published and disseminated across the teacher community

Conclusion

Promoting students' experience of feeling physically, socially and emotionally safe enhances learning and healthy development of students. It is necessary to follow a series of steps to concretise this goal. Systematic interventions and processes create the foundation for safe schools. Social and emotional dimensions of feeling safe influence each other; social experiences, like being bullied, lead to stress from fear of being bullied again.

Physical infrastructures can also send subtle messages on what kind of behaviour is expected. For example, school metal detectors can be seen as necessary equipment for several reasons, but they can also send a message that violence is normal, and it can happen anytime, or seating arrangements based on gender may send the message that boys and girls are different and should not mingle with each other. One key factor in making a student feel safe in school is to have a place to go to before, during or after school. That space need not be a physical space always but also can be a trustworthy individual.

It is not practical for any teacher to create a separate SEL course or programme for students. It

can be easily integrated into the academic and non-academic domains of school life. There is a variety of online resources which can be applied in the

classroom on how to integrate SEL into teaching-learning processes and other school practices, such as sports, recess, assembly etc.

Endnotes

i National Achievement Survey (NAS) is a large-scale survey of students' learning undertaken by the Ministry of Education, Government of India.

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Nurturing Wellbeing in Anganwadis

Yogesh G R

Anganwadis focus on the holistic development of children, which includes nutrition, good health, safety and opportunities for learning. In the first six years of life, parents and the *anganwadi* teacher are a major influence on children and must ensure nurturing of the children's physical and mental wellbeing.

Physical wellbeing

Saksham Anganwadi and *Poshan 2.0* is 'an Integrated Nutrition Support Programme which seeks to address the challenges of malnutrition in children, adolescent girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers through a strategic shift in nutrition content and delivery and by creation of a convergent ecosystem to develop and promote practices that nurture health, wellness and immunity' (Introduction, *Mission Saksham Anganwadi 2021*). The focus on children's physical

wellbeing starts well before a child is born – from the time the mother is pregnant, the *anganwadi* starts providing healthy midday meals in some states and take-home rations in others. This continues through the lactating period and till the child reaches the age of three. Once the child is enrolled in an *anganwadi* centre, he/she gets good and balanced nutrition through midday meals.

The *anganwadi* teacher ensures a safe and clean environment in and around the centre. She also implements good hygiene practices for habit formation, such as hand-washing, combing hair, etc., through daily activities. In partnership with the health department, the teacher also ensures that the children are immunised. The teacher provides opportunities every day for indoor and outdoor play for ensuring physical development.



Figure 1. Children are given opportunities for playing to ensure physical wellbeing



Figure 2. Children washing their hands before their meal

Mental wellbeing

Enabling environment

The physical environment in and around the *anganwadi* centre can have a huge impact on the wellbeing of young children. Children should feel that the *anganwadi* is a safe and secure place where they can spend time. This is especially vital for children who may come from disadvantaged communities or broken homes. Children's moods are affected by their environment. Colourful bright paintings of animals, plants, etc., on walls, not only welcome the children but also contribute to their sense of safety and wellbeing.

To provide a conducive learning environment that promotes children's engagement, the teacher must organise materials and furniture in the space available in the learning centres to ensure structure, accessibility and predictability for children.

As responsive caregivers, *anganwadi* teachers build trust and emotional security through constant interactions with children creating a psychologically safe place.

Venkatamma, an *anganwadi* teacher in a rural hamlet used to tap a stick on the ground two or three times to bring back the attention of her children when they were distracted. She said that the 'fear of the stick' was the best way to discipline the children, or they would not listen to what was being taught. As part of a workshop, the teachers were given a few techniques to grab the attention of the children, such as habituating the children to say *ooi* whenever teachers say *pillalu* (children) or clap three times when teachers clapped twice. Venkatamma implemented these in her centre and has stopped using the stick. She says that now the children are talking to her more and answering better than they used to earlier.

Social wellbeing

Anganwadis, being the first contact with the world outside the home, play a major role in the social development of a child. In an *anganwadi* centre, the teacher facilitates appropriate social interactions

among children, thereby creating opportunities for them to learn social skills of interacting with others, understanding others' feelings and expressing their own feelings.

Kannan would occasionally become aggressive and would not talk with other children. He would not allow other children to touch him. Even during playtime, the teacher observed that he would sit alone and play with just one toy. Even when asked a specific question, he would keep quiet. The teacher interacted with Kannan's mother and found out that Kannan's parents had a troubled relationship with frequent quarrels and physical abuse. The teacher now understood the problem and started talking to Kannan frequently even though at first, he did not respond. She showed love and care. In two weeks' time, he started responding in monosyllables. In a month, he started getting involved in school activities and began talking with other children. After six months, Kannan was one of the most active children in her centre. A sensitive and caring teacher can have a positive impact on children's social wellbeing.

Through initial interactions that occur within the classroom between peers, teachers and family members, children become self-aware and then start building relationships with these people around them. Through activities and stories, they develop the habit of listening to instructions, waiting for a turn in a queue, and sharing among the peer group. They start learning to make friends and understanding others' feelings and actions. Children with a well-developed sense of social wellbeing are likely to have high self-esteem, self-confidence, and empathy and maintain lasting friendships, which minimise challenging behaviours and result in a positive impact on their mental health.

Emotional wellbeing

The role of the *anganwadi* teacher in creating and sustaining a secure emotional environment for young children is of paramount importance. Emotions are feelings that arise based on the people and circumstances around us. Emotional development means developing the ability to understand emotions, express oneself freely, self-regulate and act appropriately. As emotional development is rapid among young children, they require more opportunities to observe and express



Figure 3. Children interacting with each other in a Learning Corner

their emotions. Emotional wellbeing means that the child is happy, feeling good and experiencing positive emotions like love, joy etc.

Emotional deprivation can have an adverse impact on a child's development in the long run. Emotions affect children's physical and psychological wellbeing. Children who are insecure or have conflict-ridden relationships with their caregivers can have problems building positive relationships with others. Children who are unable to regulate their frustrations and anger also have difficulty in making friends, attending to learning tasks, engaging teachers' positive attention and managing disappointments. Children from economically-deprived families are more likely to manifest behavioural and emotional problems (Bradley and Corwyn 2002). As most of the children who come to *anganwadis* are from economically-disadvantaged families, it becomes even more critical for the teachers to focus on their emotional wellbeing and interventions in this aspect during the early years of a child's life may be most important in diminishing the harmful effects of poverty on children's behavioural and emotional development (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997).

Children express basic emotions of attraction to pleasant stimuli and withdrawal from unpleasant ones from very early on. With development and experience, this gradually develops as different expressions for varying emotions, such as happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness and disgust.

Identifying and naming an emotion is part of emotional development. The teacher needs to provide ample opportunities for children to identify emotions in daily life. Conversation, stories and play activities help children to identify and name emotions.

Children model socially-appropriate behaviour based on the adults in their life. For instance, if adults shout at others when angry, then children, in turn, learn to shout at others to show their anger. Parents and teachers need to create a secure emotional environment where children can express their emotions fearlessly.

A few things that the teachers can do to enhance emotional wellbeing in children are:

- Greet children when they meet them. This makes them feel acknowledged
- Spend quality time with children every day



Figure 4. Teacher engaging children in an activity of identifying emotions

- discussing their experiences
- Respond to the feelings and actions of children
- Appreciate children's efforts. Such encouragement builds happiness and self-esteem among children

Appreciation to increase self-worth

As 4-year-old Yasmeen gets ready to throw the ball into the basket, the *anganwadi* teacher claps her hands and calls Yasmeen's name repeatedly. All the children also clap their hands to encourage Yasmeen to throw the ball. The ball misses the basket and falls. The teacher continues to clap, picks up the ball and gives it to Yasmeen with a smile and asks her to throw it again. The encouragement continues. The ball misses the basket. The teacher once again picks up the ball with a smile and asks her to try again. Every time the teacher appreciates the child's participation, irrespective of whether the ball goes into the basket or not. In this simple way, the teacher makes the children realise the importance of enjoying the process of trying and doing.

Appreciation makes children feel good about themselves, thereby increasing their confidence to

explore new things. It builds their self-esteem and makes them take pride in the things they are able to do. It helps children to put in more effort and keep trying even if they are not able to do it the first or the second time. It motivates them to learn from their mistakes and improve with each try.

By appreciating the effort, the children put in, rather than focussing on the outcome of the effort, the teacher builds resilience which encourages children to keep trying. Appreciation also reinforces good behaviours. A teacher can show appreciation in many ways, such as smiling, praising the effort by clapping or cheering, giving a pat on the back, shaking hands etc.

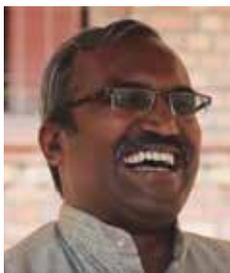
Conclusion

If the daily routine of the *anganwadi* focuses on children's hygiene, physical and mental wellbeing, it will create lifelong habits in children. Children in *anganwadis* who are physically and mentally healthy tend to be happy and enjoy participating in activities which in turn motivates them to learn and develop faster than children who are not enrolled in *anganwadis*. This also tends to have a positive impact on children's attendance and when they come regularly to the *anganwadi*, their chances of developing better are greater.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

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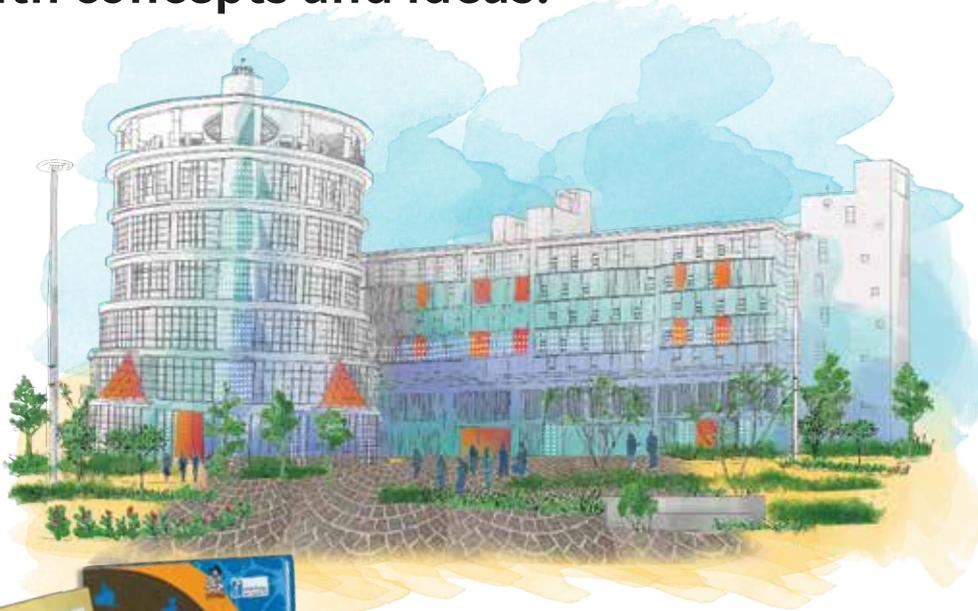
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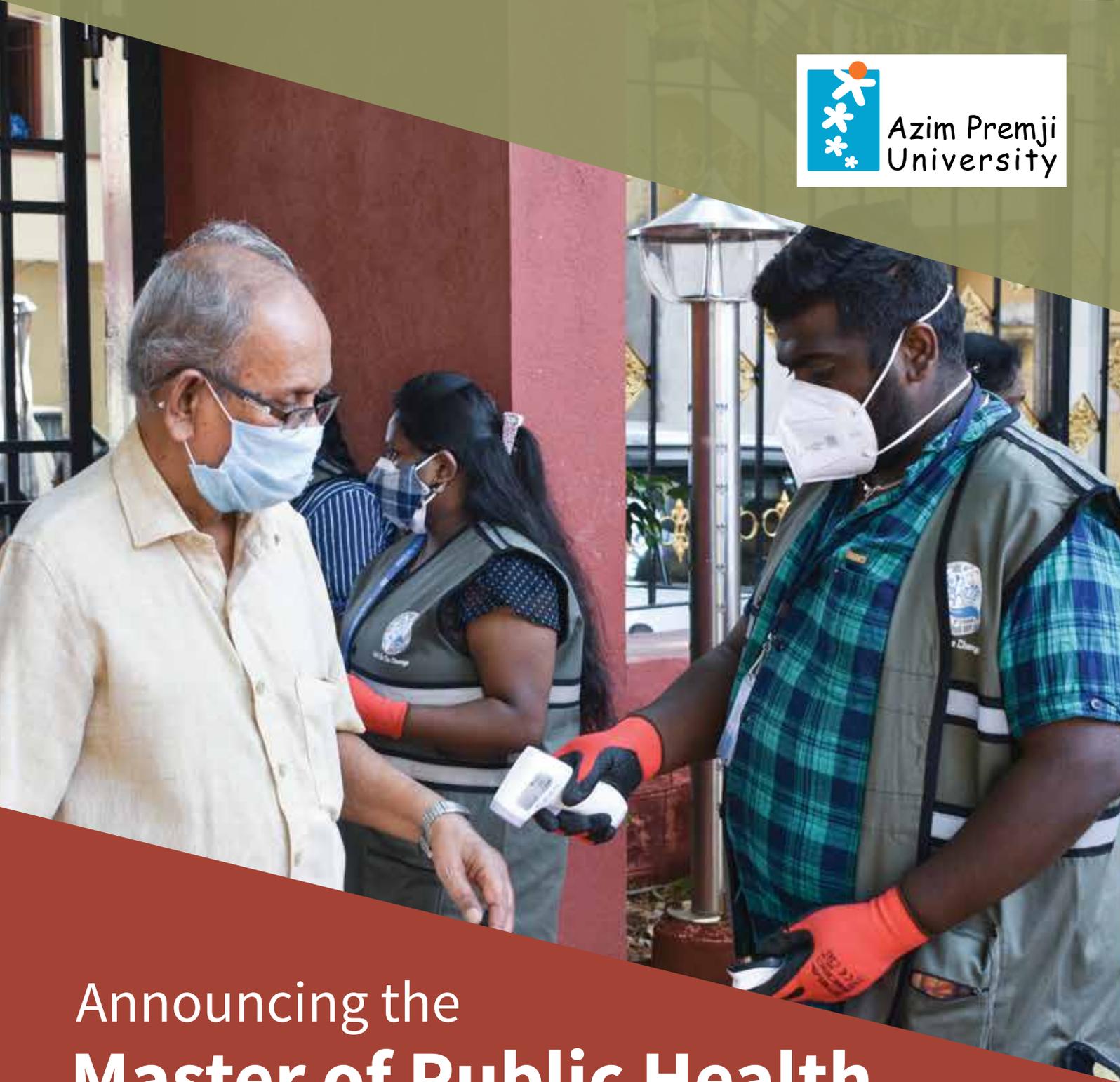


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