

## FOCUS

# How workshops helped develop mental health in schools after the pandemic

The two-year break from schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for parents, teachers and, most of all, children. Stuck indoors without interaction with other children, no outdoor games and physical activity, those fortunate to have smart phones and Internet connectivity soon tired of Zoom classes. 'Say No to discrimination' and 'Project Empathy,' put together by educationist and founder of Project Empathy, Vibha Lakhera, have been nurturing emotional well-being and addressing mental health issues of students in Delhi, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Kashmir

USHA RAI, New Delhi

Many of the workshops have been supported by the Assam Rifles and the Indian Army in remote regions of the Northeast and Kashmir. Each workshop, spread over three days, works with teachers first to explain the concept of empathy and how it could draw out the latent qualities of caring and nurturing that exists in every human being. The concept is then shared with children in interactive sessions of storytelling, art work, interaction and role plays. With their confidence boosted, children open up and share their problems as well as their dreams.

Towards April-end, the workshop was held in the Army Goodwill School (AGS) in Boniyar, Kashmir, with 30 teachers and 137 students. The school is in Baramullah District, between Baramullah and Uri, close to the LOC (Line of Control). Exposed to shelling and terrorism, the children literally live on the margins. About 95 per cent of the students and teachers at the school are Muslim and most of them speak Pahari, the local language of Boniyar Tehsil. Many of them also speak other languages like Hindi, Urdu, Gojri, Kashmiri and Punjabi. The children are taught in English in the school and the workshop was conducted in Hindi and English. To reinforce empathy among the students, more workshops are planned in the school over the coming six months and a big event in October.

Discrimination and empathy are two ends of the same spectrum, says Vibha Lakhera. The Army was keen on building the capacity of local youth, whether in Kashmir or the Northeast. Vibha's project helped her understand what was happening in their lives and to reach out to them. The first day went in orienting teachers to the concept of empathy and its long term benefits for human development. They were told how 'creating collective compassionate memories' for students would have a lifelong impact on student behaviour and give them a healthy emotional foundation.

With the pandemic, migration and job loss became part of the economic slowdown, and mental health issues have acquired a new urgency. The teachers were introduced to reaching out to children through empathy as being different from sympathy. A new awareness was created on the importance of curiosity and imagination in young minds practicing empathy. The school principal termed the workshop as 'the need of the hour'.

The second day was devoted to the students, introducing them to empathy both conceptually and through practical demonstration with role play and stories. Neatly dressed in their blue uniforms, a large number of girls covering their heads with white scarves, there was uncertainty, apprehension and even some nervousness in the air. However, as Vibha in her gentle, soothing voice nar-

rated the story of Rahim, the naughty school boy from Mumbai, the children got absorbed in this antics and school life in the big city of Bollywood who they had all heard of but not visited.

Rahim loved teasing his younger brother at home, much to his mother's annoyance. In school, too, he was constantly thinking of ways to tease his friends and other children. One day, Anjali, a schoolmate slipped on the playground and fell. All the children began laughing and Anjali began to cry. Rahim walked up to her and asked what had happened. She said she had slipped on the water and fallen and her leg was hurting.

Rahim also had two inner voices, Inva and Binva, who were constantly chattering in his head. Binva was white in colour. It was like a white handkerchief waving gently and urging him to be positive, to do good deeds. Inva was red colour, louder and pushing him to tease and to get the most fun out of a situation. On seeing Anjali, helpless and crying, Inva kept goading Rahim, "Let's have some fun. She is a sissy...only a girl." Binva, however, gently whispered, "You know your name means compassion. Live up to it".

However, red Inva was louder and Rahim went up to Anjali and said "I once fell from a tree and broke my hand but I did not cry. Did you slip deliberately so that you can skip school tomorrow?" All the children laughed louder and Anjali, hurting emotionally as well as physically, sobbed.



Eye-catching cut-outs highlight what Project Empathy is all about.

Happy with his joke, Rahim walked away. To make the story more dramatic and absorbing, as associate of Vibha, Apala, kept waving a white and red handkerchief as Binva and Inva chattered in Rahim's mind.

A few days later, class teacher Shivani had to give roles to students for the school play. Rahim got a lead role but Manjunath, sitting in a corner, was looking dejected. Rahim went up to him and found out that like the previous year, this year too Manjunath had got a minor role. The white and red Binva and Inva too began chattering in Rahim's head. This time Rahim listened to Binva and went up to Manju-

nath and said, "I can understand your pain. Don't lose heart. Little things lead to big achievements. Let us go and play on the swings and you can tell me about your puppy." That day Binva was looking brighter and whiter and Rahim was feeling happier and lighter. He had lived up to the meaning of his name and in the process had shown empathy for Manjunath.

The children were then asked if they too had heard their inner voices, their Inva and Binva; the colours they visualised them in; the kind of help they wanted when in trouble and how they could help others who were troubled. Based on the story of Rahim, the children then enacted a skit to show the difference between empathy and sympathy.

Rizwan, a student of class 7, was the only child in the group of 137 who knew the meaning of empathy. He had read about it but since he did not understand the word, he looked it up in the dictionary. Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone who is troubled but don't act. Empathy is shown when you feel sorry for someone and help them is the lesson learnt by storytelling and enacting the skit.

Following the discussion, Rimshi, a Class 8 student fought

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Photos: UR/VL

L-r: Children discuss and write about their inner voices; Vibha Lakhera tells a story on empathy; and planting an apple tree in the school.

# It's time to take a re-look at policies to combat climate change

Himachal Pradesh has been witnessing forest fires and water shortage, despite a number of water supply schemes being implemented. Here is a piece on how the authorities should respond to the alarming situation which doesn't bode well for the future of the Himalayan state

**BHARAT DOGRA**, New Delhi

There have been reports of water shortage and forest fires all through the month of April in Himachal Pradesh. The suffering this caused villagers in the state was, ironically, paralleled by the increased rush of tourists to popular hill stations like Shimla, Manali and Kasauli.

According to rainfall data, from March 1 to April 23 this year, the state received just 7 per cent of the norm for this period. Due to this, agriculture as well as horticulture suffered. Whether apple or stone fruit orchards or farms growing vegetables and grain, loss of greater or lesser magnitude was reported from everywhere. Drinking water shortage has been reported not just from remote villages but also from big cities like Solan and Shimla. In Solan, the situation was aggravated by polluting agents which mysteriously appeared, as well as cases of water pipes bursting and wasting a lot of water.

Even as water scarcity is becoming more acute in many

villages despite many water schemes being implemented as a result of the prolonged dry spell, water pollution is becoming a problem. Many water sources are already in a precarious condition and tankers had to be arranged to supply water for some ponds to save fish from dying.

Though it is still early summer, forest fires have already become a menace. From April 1 to 24, 449 forest fires were reported, affecting 3209 hectares of forest land. But smaller fires do not make it to official records. Particularly worrying have been fires close to densely populated Shimla, in areas such as Taradevi, Rajhana, Panjri and Kachighati. Although there is hope of rains providing relief in the near future, preparations to face a possible prolongation of dry conditions have also started. Nearly 1800 youth have been asked to join in exercises to extinguish fires and protect forests.

While some of the administrative efforts are welcome,

the dry spell has exposed some glaring weaknesses in the developmental work. Though, in terms of pipelines and taps installations, the progress of drinking water schemes may be impressive, in terms of actual protection of water sources, the condition is not good, as reports of excessive sand mining and pollution continue to appear from time to time. The natural flow of the Sutlej and some other rivers is being harmed by excessive hydro-project construction.

Much has been said about large-scale clearing of fallen pine needles for use in various products, but they continue to layer the forest floor in large quantities, posing a problem because they are inflammable and contribute to the spread of fires. A system of forest protection based on close cooperation between the government and village communities is really needed, but steps in this direction are not adequate.

On the other hand, the introduction of exotic species and

plant material in orchards has been encouraged, and it will be difficult for them to withstand the harsher and warmer conditions brought about by climate change. The more hardy local species would have been a better alternative. The greater focus on dams and hydro projects, on pipelines and highway projects and on exotic trees and crops can be counter-productive when basic natural resources are not protected, when rivers and springs and other water resources are getting depleted and polluted, when orchards and farms are becoming more vulnerable to spells of hotter and drier weather.

These problems were reflected in a rather amusing controversy related to a World Bank-funded Rs 1134-crore project for horticulture and orchards. The media reported that 34 officials were preparing to go abroad to learn from horticultural practices abroad. Problems started when some of the bigger and richer orchard owners said they too wanted to be a part of this del-

egation. In the tussle over finding a place on the foreign trip, at public cost of course, what went unacknowledged was that, instead of spending so much on the travel and boarding of so many people in foreign countries, it would have been better to meet the pressing needs of several small orchard owners.

The recent dry spell, the alarmingly low rainfall as well as the spurt in forest fires point to a climate change problem. In fact, even heat wave-type conditions were reported for a few days in some parts of the plains in the state. To cope with the difficult times ahead, what is needed is a much better and wider-reaching response to climate change as well as policies and practices that are aimed to protect the environment. ■

## A village waits in suspense...

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Budhram does not use farm machinery, chemical fertilisers or pesticides. He does everything with the help of bullocks and human labour. "We get about 40 bags of paddy and sufficient pulses, millets, vegetables and oilseeds for our needs," says Dulani.

However, they face two problems of recent origin. "We get

heavy rain during the flowering of paddy. The rainfall plus the heavy runoff in the paddy field due to undulating terrain destroys the flowers," says Dulani. This year, the family cultivated three indigenous varieties of paddy – Huna, Hira and Asamchudi – as well as some high-yielding varieties (HYV) like Puja and Bhuban. "These HYVs are not produc-

tive anymore, so I have decided to replace those next year. I always try to cultivate local varieties but I was persuaded to try Puja and Bhuban. For the first two years we got good returns but the yield gradually declined," Budhram explains.

They had a good maize crop this year, which they used for their own needs, and distributed amongst relatives. The 20 banana plants bear fruit all through the year. Budhram gifts bananas to relatives during festivals and marriages. Two chilli plants supply the family's needs.

"Preserving seeds is Dulani's responsibility," says Budhram "She draws the required amount of seeds from the yield immediately after threshing and stores those separately." The family hopes they will be allowed to remain on their traditional land even after the area is declared a tiger reserve. ■



Dulani and Budhram in the backyard of their farm house, showing the spot a hundred metres away where the elephants stood.

## How workshops helped...

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her nervousness and volunteered to share her pandemic experience. Her hands were shaking but when Vibha put a hand on her shoulder she picked up courage and spoke. Mohan spoke about the Inwa/ Binwa fight within him to complete his homework. Most of the time, he admitted, Binwa won and he felt happy when the teacher appreciated his work. Sibat and Zuphi of Class 6 shared how they long for help when they have a problem.

Other children too said they feel motivated when their feelings are understood and there is someone to help with their problems. Shoaib Yasin of Class 6 spoke of how he helped his grandfather with gardening during the pandemic. Manan, however, confessed that the online classes during the pandemic had made him lazy. Raizin Mushtaq of Class 7 spoke about his love for space and his dream to go to Mars and the moon. He learnt

about the solar system from the net and exercised daily so that he can survive in outer space should his dream come true.

On the third day of the workshop, children planted an apple tree which they called the Tree of Compassion. Through this activity, children are steered to extending empathy towards the plant world and a dialogue begins around climate change.

A tree has also been placed in the school library in Boniyar and children will decorate it with leaves on which they write down their good deed of the day – their actual demonstration of empathy. New values and resilience are being built in the education of children. ■