

As schools reopen, our public-school education system will struggle with the children missing from classrooms - children lost due to migration, child labour, child marriages and so on. While this will remain a pressing challenge, another hidden challenge would be with those children who come back to school. These children will not only need academic support to cope with regression but also psychosocial support to help them make sense of their life during the pandemic, heal and become ready to learn again. While the education system prepares to tackle the academic regression, it is important that educators and teachers give equal importance to the social and emotional regression that has occurred during the pandemic.

Stress as a trigger for regression

Children have gone through tremendous amounts of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The looming fear of infection, loss of family members, not having access to their friends and teachers, forced migration, domestic and child abuse and so on. The Childline India telephone helpline did not stop ringing during the lockdown and is indicative of the distress that children experienced. The helpline received more than 92,000 SOS calls asking for protection from abuse and violence in the first 11 days of the lockdown in 2020.

Nancy Close, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Child Study Centre at the Yale School of Medicine and Associate Director of the Yale Program in Early Childhood Education shares: 'I've been seeing a lot of regression and more than what, in typical times, is developmentally appropriate. I've seen children regressing through using baby talk, needing help with routines, needing help with sleeping and toileting – and much more than what's usual for them. Coping with and expressing strong feelings can be really challenging, so we're seeing temper tantrums in older and younger children and even college students. We're also seeing a lot of behavioural challenges. We notice children getting really sad over not being with their friends or their teachers and demonstrating exaggerated emotions and behaviours around the shifting in what school

looks like. All of these uncertainties are so much more prevalent and so much more frustrating because we are all striving to reach something that is normal and predictable. We are discovering that consistency and predictability have been more difficult to achieve during COVID-19. This can lead children to feel anxious and frustrated which can certainly result in behavioural dysregulation.'

As children transition back into school, creating a space for personal and collective healing is key to ensure preparedness to connect back and create the readiness to learn again in the school environment.

Using stories for healing

How can teachers and educators prepare for this important task that lies ahead? Can children's literature and stories be used as a tool to help with this process?

This will require us to look at reading from a whole new angle. Reading is not merely the act of reading, it is a way to understand, decipher and internalise the world we live in. Denise von Stocker writes,ⁱⁱ 'Reading, from a global point of view, is a very complex activity which is not merely decoding a text, but it entails too the child's capabilities to understand what he has just read, to integrate it in his own context and personal experiences by analysing it in a critical way so he is able to take a stand on what he has read. Only this kind of complete and deep reading education will take children towards a real, integrated literacy.'

Reading and listening to stories, then, has a critical role to play in how children make meaning of their changing worlds, internally and externally. An important framework for supporting this lies in using stories as a medium for social and emotional learning, and the process, a chance for healing.

I work at the *Buguri Community Library Project*, and the initiative, *Hasiru Dala*, a not-for-profit organisation that works with informal waste pickers

in south India. The initiative runs community libraries in *bastis* that waste pickers live in and makes books available to all the children within a community. Children of waste-pickers are some of the most marginalised and at-risk children, hence, it was important for the library project to respond to their social and emotional needs. At the library, there is a focus and an attempt to integrate these needs of the children into our work.

Creating a vocabulary for emotions

An important aspect of socio-emotional learning is the ability to identify and articulate one's own emotions. Many times, children struggle to recognise their felt emotions or express their needs. Also, given our cultural context, we discourage children from speaking about and expressing certain emotions, especially difficult ones, such as anger and sadness.

About three years ago, when I started working on a module for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) with a group of children who had not spoken earlier about emotions, I started by showing them puppets with faces depicting various emotions. When I showed them a puppet with a smiling face and asked them to identify the emotion, most responded by saying - *smile*. So, the first few sessions were spent establishing the difference in naming and understanding basic emotions. This naming was an important part of the articulation, for example, in saying, 'I am not talking to you because I am sad'. It took a while for the children to decipher the difference between the response to the emotion from what was the trigger/cause for it, for example, a smile or laughter comes from happiness or tears come from sadness (in most cases). As the group matured into naming the basic emotions and sharing stories about them, we slowly opened conversations on mixed emotions. For example, when a child expressed how she felt after her mother scolds her, she said she felt angry, but she was also crying. I asked her if that was so because she was feeling something else too? She nodded as I held up the sad puppet. This opened conversations on mixed emotions. This, I think, is an important phase in developing self-awareness - to be able to tie thoughts and feelings to responses and behaviours.

Building a vocabulary to make the connection between a felt emotion and the response to it became a critical starting point of work with SEL. Books like *Feelings to Share From A to Z* by Todd

and Peggy Snow, *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain, *My Many Coloured Days* by Dr Seuss and so on, invite children to name, claim and share their emotions.

Picture books for socio-emotional learning

Trudy Ludwig, children's advocate and author, says in her article *Using Children's Literature to Build Social-Emotional Skill*,ⁱⁱⁱ 'Well-written, developmentally age-appropriate literature offers wonderful teachable moments that allow children to:

- Identify with the story's protagonist
- Acquire insight into the characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions in relation to the particular issue
- Experience catharsis (the release of pent-up feelings) upon the realisation that they are not the only ones who have this problem
- Explore other possible ways of working out their own problems by seeing how the characters handled problems themselves and how their actions or words played out
- Share personal experiences as a natural progression of discussion'

A good story that extends to developmentally-appropriate discussions can provide the opportunity for children to explore emotions that provoke conflicts and/or events that might mirror those emotions they and/or their friends routinely experience. This mirroring experience can help the child come out of patterns of self-isolation and provide new pathways to deal with their feelings.

In one of the library sessions that explored the emotion of anger, I used the book *Angry Akku* by Vinayak Varma (Pratham Books) and experienced some of Ludwig's theory at play. During the read-aloud of the book, I stopped at the juncture where Akku is distressed about an embarrassing incident at school. I asked the children what they think she should do. Most of the children reacted by saying that she should beat up the bully. But as the story proceeded, the children realised that it is not how the protagonist reacted. I asked them again to share why they thought she did not react that way. One of the children said, 'She had self-control'. This triggered the discussion on what makes us angry and how we choose to react to these emotions. Among other incidents, like personal conflicts with friends or teachers, children spoke about how

domestic violence in their homes made them angry.

Exploring difficult emotions

In another such incident, the story *Mukund and Riaz* by Nina Sabnani (Tulika Books), triggered conversations on friendships lost because of changing circumstances that were not under one's control and the sadness and the grief that such memories brought. The book explores the friendship between two boys in the background of the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. During the extension activity for this book, which was about drawing a picture of the person you missed the most or a memory that is special, eight-year-old Sharanya drew a picture of her father. He had committed suicide the previous year. She made several attempts at drawing a picture but every time she would draw a face, she would erase it. She finally drew two figures. Initially, I thought

it must be a picture of her with her father. As she left the session that day, I gently asked her about the drawing. She said the figure to the right was her father and the one to the left was her mother. I observed that the mother's figure was bigger, maybe depicting her mother's larger presence in Sharanya's life today.

Carefully curated picture books, engagements and interactions can thus lead to very rich exchange while addressing the social and emotional needs and growth of children. As children return to school, while many might experience excitement and relief, there is much that has shifted inside them, that requires exploring and healing. Hence, creating an SEL curriculum within the school and using the power of literature and stories would be a vital and necessary change at this point in time.

Endnotes

- i Is my child regressing due to the COVID 19 pandemic?
- ii Stocker, Dennis Von (2009): The Importance of Literacy and Books in Children's Development - Intellectual, Affective and Social Dimensions
- iii Ludwig, Trudy. 'Using Children's Literature to Build Social-Emotional Skills. Sept 24, 2018



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