

Childhood Traumas and Healing in an Educational Space

Shivani Taneja and Savita Sohit

Critical discussions regarding the quality of formal education have been around pedagogy, content, language and academic subjects. But as more and more children from all backgrounds enter our school spaces, in addition to these aspects, it would be helpful to examine children's lives a little more and touch upon the aspect of their well-being.

Here, we share experiences of our school run by Muskaan,ⁱ for children from vulnerable backgrounds. All our children fall in the category of urban poor and have been working to earn since childhood. Many are also children of denotified tribal (DNT)ⁱⁱ communities living in and around Bhopal city.

Childhood Realities

Sohini was around 11 years old when she came to us. She was furious with her mother for having left the family and vowed never to speak to her. She was also angry with her father for not repairing their house and for drinking every day. When her elder sister married at a young age, she felt further let down. A very bright child, she did well in academics but was poor in her social relationships. It would be impossible to help her cheer up if something upset her.

Amar had been in a hostel for a year where the warden would make pornographic videos of the boys. Amar's parents, daily wage earners, finally withdrew him from the hostel when he ran away from there and enrolled him in our school. Here, he would often get into physical fights with other children and if the teacher tried to intervene, he would hit the teacher as well.

Rohit's father would look after the children at home while his wife would go scrap-picking. His alcohol addiction led to his death when the four children were aged between 1 to 10 years. His own two sisters had died by suicide. Rohit's young mother in her mid-20s is continuously taunted by her in-laws. Rohit would often not sleep at home and would be thrashed for this by his paternal uncle. While in school, he would often beat up his younger brothers.

Trauma in socially vulnerable groups

As you read these life sketches, you may feel that these children come from more difficult circumstances than others. But the truth is that a large part of our urban poor, DNT groups, *dalits* and *adivasis* have been facing repression and discrimination over generations, which has left a deep imprint on their psyche and functionality. Consumerism, deprivation, land displacement, forced evictions, urban squalor, unemployment, violence and substance abuse are impacting the marginalised in ways like never before. And it may be true that more and more children than we can imagine are leading traumatised lives.

Legacy (Methot, 2019)ⁱⁱⁱ is evidence of the long-term effects on indigenous peoples of the Americas caused by colonisation. Methot speaks of the intergenerational trauma, elaborating how colonisation and the residential schools have left their imprints on people, and even those who have not lived this trauma, bear the impact of it. Dr Kolk^{iv} also writes of adverse childhood experiences and their long-time impact on adulthood. 'Traumatic experiences have a more pervasive impact when they are experienced during the first decade of life' (than a single traumatic event – such as death or a violent or life-threatening situation) because this impacts a child's framework of the world altogether.

Research and writings around indigenous communities and Black groups, more when written with an insider perspective, are giving us insights into the mental make-up of children who so far, the privileged world only referred to as 'difficult' and branded negatively with 'poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and lack of concern' on behalf of their parents. In a 2013 study across 200 schools in Chhattisgarh, about 40 percent of teachers had negative views about children's educability, while only about 13 percent had positive views.

When these children enter our school spaces, we need to have a 'trauma lens' and not adopt the trajectory of blame or a colonial mindset that

their lot needs to be 'civilised'. As we examine their childhood, we are compelled to see what the children are going through from birth (or even pre-birth).

Basic needs cannot be limited to food and shelter but should include affection and respect. In the absence of these, substance abuse, recklessness, and suicide attempts become a part of coping mechanisms. As children grow up, they sometimes experience these realities directly or indirectly in the ways their parents negotiate the world. Discrimination, abuse and disconnect with the world are the norm for a *dalit*, DNT or *adivasi* child in our country.

Intergenerational trauma

For the denotified tribes, this vilification started with the colonial concept of them being 'thugs' but for the *dalit* communities, this is the curse of the Hindu *varna* system. The more these communities have interacted with the privileged sections of society and the state, the more they have been forced to bear rebuke and alienation. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 allowed the state to separate the children of 'criminal tribes' for reform. More and more children becoming part of child protection systems in our country come from such vulnerable families. This alienation and removal of agency for these social groups since times immemorial have not been corrected even in post-independent India. May it be a shop, a school, a police station, a hospital, or any government office, they are shooed aside as if they are not humans.

It would not be hard for us to understand how it would impact a person's mental makeup when she/he is being belittled regularly. There is an absence of control in life because anyone can harass you, detain you, or move you out of your home. There is no way to respond to this kind of repression that comes from an external source as that is much more powerful. This subjugation then builds up and finds an outlet on people you actually love, as they are the only ones vulnerable to you.

Resilience is different from healing. Communities are resilient. There is an extensive effort to support and provide a safety net for children. A child would be fed by others when his parents are not available; another one would sleep in her neighbour's house if her house leaked when it rained. But people have not been able to heal. They carry wounds, and these are transferred from generation to generation unless there is a conscious intervention to stop this intergenerational trauma.

Reflections on healing

For the healing to begin, we need to train ourselves first to be able to see each child for their uniqueness rather than the categories that society has classified them into. We need the macro picture to understand the background, but in our classrooms, it is at the level of each child that the healing has to happen. We have consolidated here what we feel has supported our children, though this is not always enough.

Children need to feel loved

Children need to know that they are wanted and important. When people talk to them and hear them, they feel acknowledged and reassured. There is a sense of security that someone cares. This may mean seeking out the child to meet her in the class, the corridor or any other space. It may simply be enquiring if they have had their meal or if they are feeling cold, but it means a lot to the child who otherwise does not get this attention from his family members who are overburdened in trying to meet their basic needs.

It is okay to feel pain

With a lot to manage, we sometimes switch off our emotions. This does not mean that we stop feeling, but by ignoring and suppressing feelings, we stop responding to them. Therefore, when a negative emotion comes out, it may be more extreme than required and is possibly a response to another time. For example, in school, something as trivial as their elbows colliding can lead to a fistfight. Some children are able to move out of this urge to defend themselves in a secure and trustworthy environment, but for some, this survival mechanism to overpower the other is very high. As children grow in years or after an episode, they are able to recognise that they are getting provoked. Most are able to talk about their feelings when a safe space is created – for some, this may be in a group session and for others, it could be a one-to-one conversation.

Expressions in writing, art, and body movement fulfil therapeutic purposes. Children learn to let go when they are able to engage with the pain. Future choices in life are then made from a fresh space than through pent-up emotions.

I can influence and control

In school, we consciously try to build and strengthen the children's agency. We like to ensure that children have a say in many matters; they have complete freedom to choose what they eat, how they dress, the language(s) they speak, what they write or draw,

and their feedback of us.

This participation gives children a sense of control and confidence. They understand what it is to live without fear, and that this should be the 'normal' way of life. Usually living in fragile environments, inside the home or outside, children are targeted only for who they are, in terms of their caste. Therefore, their body and mind are often in a 'flight' or 'defence' mode. But as we work on their agency, gently acknowledging what they are feeling, they learn to claim their space. A group of children from the *kanjar* community initially felt threatened and wanted to leave school, when an adolescent picked on them by calling them (abusively) by their 'community name'. There was a discussion in which the students spoke to each other, face-to-face, seeing what the impact was of one person's comments on the others, and an acknowledgement that the world has made each of us a little more cruel to the other, and to see if there was space for forgiveness.

How am I behaving with others?

At times, people are unable to see that their behaviour is impacting another to function in a specific way. When I call my classmate by an insulting or offensive name, how does he feel? What do you feel when someone asks you to share your story? How can I show that I care? What is my tone, is it respectful? It is through such conversations and reflections that adolescents and children need to be facilitated to understand the impact of their behaviours. Listening, understanding, expressing, apologising, and moving forward in relationships need to become necessary skills to resolve our conflicts and control our web of emotions. Running away from the damage we cause cannot be our auto mode.

Managing the negativity that comes from outside, there is a level of immunity or a hard core that is built inside each person, but it is only a survival mechanism. Expression of anger and management of anger or resentment, reasons behind these feelings, and giving space to another and to oneself, need to be part of conscious conversations as well as actions within our space.

Communicating with another

We create a lot of opportunities for children to express themselves. There is very rarely a child who is not able to open up. As children share, they learn to trust the world. Experiences of hunger have brought the whole class to a standstill, where each child in the group is connecting with the other. Conversations on death enable children to share their unresolved

emotions. A child often wants to talk about these things but cannot find an adult she/he can speak to. We, therefore, include conversations in many of our lesson plans.

You are more important than your mistake

Children tend to get pulled up for actions that are not in their control, or they do not know how to correct that deed. After repeatedly experiencing this, children tend to avoid situations where they feel they may be under a scanner of any sort.

We begin to take accountability for our actions when we know that we are not going to be punished, we are not 'bad'; that it is okay to falter, to hesitate, to not know – this is another kind of scaffolding children need. Sharing a problem and seeking support is an essential skill in life. As we learn constructive coping mechanisms in life, stories of children and young people feeling overwhelmed by poor marks, or the unknown, may reduce.

Friends and teamwork

For many, schools are spaces where children interact with people outside their families. But actually, social hierarchies play out here also. For children who come from these marginalised groups, their diffidence to mix with other children is very acute. Also, making yourself invisible is a learnt behaviour to avoid having to bear someone's wrath.

As adults, we may need to consciously encourage friendships and collaborative work, thereby helping them in understanding how to function with others without power structures in play. Making a big jigsaw together, doing a farming activity, and preparing a common chart are some such activities.

Friendships work as an anchor when things are not going well at home. As children settle into their school space, they also turn, often unconsciously, to their peers for support and solidarity in the choices they are making. For example, even a decision of whether I come to school every day is influenced by peers. It is rare that within children's own limited spaces, they find role models or people who encourage them in believing in their dreams and aspirations.

Physical touch is important

A hug or holding hands as you walk, as long as the adult knows that they are showing care (as allowed to a family member) and are not crossing boundaries and there is space for the child to withdraw, should be the norm in our schools. While being conscious of children's privacy and protection concerns, the human touch soothes in many ways, especially

when the adolescent/child is neglected in family environments. It was a surprising comment from the author's daughter when she came home from school and happily shared that her teacher had 'patted my head as she spoke to me'.

The ease of touch is extended to the whole class. During discussions and sharing, or circle time, the class is encouraged to hold each other's hand which helps them to feel in tune with each other. They learn to empathise with others, provide support and not laugh at another's difficult moments.

Connecting with oneself

Meditative exercises in which children are asked to close their eyes and feel the different parts of their body; feel their heartbeats by placing their hand on their hearts, help them connect with their inner selves. Some children find it difficult to close their eyes or stay with themselves. A child shared how, while scrap-picking, she put her hand in a pipe which had a rotten animal, and the stink would not go off her hands. Distancing her hand while describing this, she curled up her nose. It is unlikely that she had shared this with anyone before.

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

Endnotes

- i Muskaan is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation working with marginalised communities living in the *bastis* in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.
- ii The British Government had listed over 150 communities under the Criminal Tribes Act which allowed the administration to forcefully 'settle' members of these communities into camps from where they could be called upon as bonded labour, and to separate children from their parents. It was considered that



Shivani Taneja has been working amidst people of denotified tribal backgrounds and impoverished communities in and around Bhopal for 25 years. She believes that education cannot be seen as an isolated academic phenomenon, and as educationists, we need to see a child's wellbeing and critical empowerment as core to their educational journey. This reflects in her concerns and work priorities, such as the building of children's collective agency, mental health amidst difficult childhoods and social justice. A teacher at heart, she enjoys being part of a classroom every day in Muskaan and observing and learning from students' responses to pedagogic interventions. She may be contacted at shivani@muskaan.org



Savita Sohith has been working in Muskaan for the past 15 years. She enjoys working and learning with children in primary classrooms and has adopted a multilingual pedagogy in her teaching methods. She also works with youth and adults in the communities, supporting them in their struggles for dignity and social justice. She may be contacted at savita.sohith@rediffmail.com

Summing up

A teacher needs to be in tune with what is impacting children's wellbeing; what is the daily context of the child: is there violence, what does the child do when she is hungry, what is the child seeing and hearing? The healing is not immediate as the damage is layered and we need to be with the child as she/he finds their internal self. 'Alone work' is as important as teamwork. Depending on available skills, we need to encourage the child to participate in many activities involving artwork, movement, dance, music, and games. The fuller a life is lived, the greater, the chances are of it finding an internal balance.

As a country, we have failed the children of our most marginalised communities. While we need to undo this damage in our classrooms, the State also needs to recognise how discrimination and targeting isolate people and put an end to unequal citizenship and move towards reparation and justice.