

INDIA WILL SEE A SHARP DECLINE OF DROPOUTS IN THEIR GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IF THEY BEGIN TO ASPIRE TO BE TRAUMA SENSITIVE SCHOOLS. AN INSIDE VIEW OF A REPLICABLE MODEL

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Abstract

India can boast about having the largest education system in the world but it has to end there.

There are 1,083,678 government schools in India, 84,614 aided schools and 325,760 private schools. As per the Education Ministry, 65.2% of all school students in 20 states go to government schools. These include schools run by the state and local government as well as the central government. 27 million children attend aided schools and 83 million go to private schools. Today, India has almost 3-4 times the number of schools than China despite a similar population. Nearly 400,000 schools have less than 50 students and a majority of schools have a maximum of two teachers per school. Although the government has mandated 1:30 teacher-student ratio in their schools, in reality, there is about a 1:100 teacher-student ratio in most schools. What makes it even more complicated is the multiple age and learning levels in one class. Around 115 million children in India study in such unviable schools.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the dropout of children from schools is one of the highest in the world because nearly 75% of children drop out of the system and never complete schooling. However, there is no such thing as a national picture when it comes to school dropouts. If we create a national picture by mathematical aggregation, that picture is meaningless since regional variations are far too big. The numbers we get may be the result of schemes like Right to Education, Mid-day Meal, etc., but the hard fact is that these numbers are only on paper and not of true learners in schools.

While there have been many speculations as to why such a high number of children get disillusioned with the idea and practice of education, the author is of the opinion that it is not necessarily the hardware problems (distance from home, lack of toilets, lack of computers etc. in schools) but the software issues (sense of well-being, motivation, self-esteem and confidence) that plays a significant role in the children continuing education.

The author, therefore, suggests that government schools and any other schools dealing with deprived children from urban slum communities should aspire to be recognised as Trauma-Sensitive schools to give their students a wholesome joyful learning experience in an environment that not only helps them survive but thrive in the education system.

Keywords: education, dropout, survive, hardware and software of education, deprivation, trauma-sensitive.

1 INTRODUCTION

As per the Education Ministry data, 65.2% (113 million,) of all school students in 20 states go to government schools (**c. 2017**). The canvas of the government school system's reach is vast and if it was an effective model then millions of children would have had a brighter future. And yet, according to current estimates, 29% of Indian children are privately educated, with more than 50% of children enrolling in private schools in urban areas. The balance has already tilted towards private schooling in cities; and, even in rural areas, nearly 20% of the children in 2004-5 were enrolled in private schools. Confidence and trust in the government education system are at an all-time low.

According to information provided by the national database for education, U-DISE, in the year 2017, there were close to 190 million children (actually 189,887,008) in elementary classes 1 to 8 across India; but only one-fifth of that number (38,823,856 children) transited to or were found enrolled in secondary classes 9 and 10; and an even smaller number (24,735,234) continued in higher secondary

classes 11 and 12. The net enrolment ratios gradually fell from 86% at the elementary level to 80% at the secondary level to just 31% at the higher secondary level.

The findings of the 2016 Annual States of Education Report (ASER) survey, a household survey of schooling and learning levels in rural India, states that around 3.5% of children between the ages of 11 and 14 years, and 13.5% between the ages of 15 and 16 years were dropouts. The survey included over 560,000 children between 3 to 16 years, in 589 districts of India.

Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) shows that 13 out of every 100 Indians between 5-29 years did not attend school or dropped out because they did not consider education “necessary” or a “good experience”. From all the above data it seems obvious that the Indian education system is failing. “We are in a severe learning crisis because a large percentage of students in elementary schools have not attained foundational literacy. If action is not taken soon, over the next few years, India itself will lose more than 10 million students from the learning system and to illiteracy.” (National Education Policy 2020).

This crisis in education has happened because the policymakers, education administrators and school teachers have overlooked the need to understand the profile of the students that come to government schools. In a country with a total population of 1.3 billion people, it is easy to fall into the trap of looking at each student as a faceless number and very little attention is given to the student’s individual needs.

The author has worked with poor communities for over two decades and has tried to understand what stops a child from a poor community from performing well in schools and being motivated to succeed.

2 PROFILE OF STUDENTS GOING TO GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

The scope of this paper addresses the challenges that poor children face completing their schooling, going for higher education and finally acquiring a highly valued job. The actors of this study are defined as “first-generation learners” (Awasthi, G. et al, 2015). The challenges that this milieu of children face can be categorized into 4 segments: (i) socio-economic and cultural (ii) educational environment at home (iii) academic challenges inside the classroom and (iv) psychological and non-academic challenges outside the school.

The above four challenges are integrated with four segments in the student’s development that pose as de-motivating factors: (i) the physical; the living conditions and neighbourhood of the students, (ii) the biological; the health and energy condition of the students, (iii) the intellectual; understanding of world view and critical thinking abilities and (iv) psychological; levels of self-esteem and wish to break the cycle of poverty.

This highly complex problem that children from marginalised homes face, leads us to question the much-quoted term “drop-out” and realistically replace it with the term “failing to survive” in the education system. Once this acknowledgement is made that schools have stopped giving children a joyful, happy experience then it will lead the school administrators and teachers to devise methods to retain their students by helping them to *survive* the eleven years in school.

None of the education policies of the past have actually addressed the question: Why is it that the children from poor backgrounds either in the villages or in the urban slums find it difficult to *survive* in a school and complete education? Educators, policymakers and implementers still lack an understanding of poverty with all its complexity and diversity. They are not sensitive to the intensity of multiple deprivations that poor children face, such as ill-health, hunger, malnutrition, alcoholism and violence and insecurity both at home and school. These children from poor communities find it difficult to *survive* deprivation and discriminations at all steps of their lives. It is this trait that the author identifies as the *trauma of deprivation*. So it would not be an exaggeration to state that underprivileged children going to the government and private schools for the poor, carry with them varying degrees of trauma that needs to be addressed.

2.1 Redefining trauma in the context of schools

Some of the common traditional causes of trauma in schools are bullying, community violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, witness to domestic violence and suicides. The author would like to add to this list, the trauma caused by hopelessness, denial, insecurity and anxiety arising out of financial distress, persistent fear of authority and loss of dignity out of public humiliation.

2.2 Socio-economic cultural reasons of trauma

In many rural areas, children have to walk long distances to reach school. And if the children are Dalits or Adivasis they are not allowed to even take the village road to school (Nambissam, G 2000). Girls are compelled to leave school once they reach puberty because there are no adequate toilet facilities in schools and it is considered unsafe to have the girl return home in the evenings. The girls experience perennial fear of being married off to just anyone for convenience. Most children from deprived backgrounds are unable to express their problems for fear of humiliation.

2.3 Educational environment at home

First-generation learners are under tremendous pressure to manage the conflicts arising out of opposing ideas and values between the school and the home. Their parents do not understand the demands of the school and create obstacles to their learning which makes them face the wrath of the teachers. Parents do not quite understand the necessity to be punctual to school and give priority to attendance and the children face the brunt of discipline in schools if otherwise.

2.4 Academic challenges inside the classroom

The learning experience of marginalized children in schools is very depressing. The way these children are treated in school is the extension of the larger context of social marginalization of the backward communities. The teachers look down on these students and do not provide a motivating environment to study. "Some teachers quite openly stated that formal education is not useful for children of the lower castes" (Anitha, B. K, 2000). Many teachers do not bother to know the names of their students and address them instead in a derogatory manner. Sensitive and shy students find dismissive gestures and reference to their background as humiliating and finally stop going to school.

2.5 Non-academic challenges outside the school

These children are severely handicapped with the lack of real role models in their lives and therefore they do not have any benchmarks for growth. The number of suicidal deaths these children witness in their families and communities makes them vulnerable to desperate measures themselves. The insecurity and instability in the homes because of domestic violence, alcoholism, abandonment, leaves an indelible impact on the child that leads to disenchantment in moving further in life.

A reference is being made to the author's earlier paper which identified the four segments in the student's development that are de-motivating factors: the **physical**; the living conditions and neighbourhood of the students, the **biological**; the health and energy condition of the students, the **intellectual**; understanding of world view and critical thinking abilities and **psychological**; levels of self-esteem and wish to break the cycle of poverty. The living conditions at home and the neighbourhood of the students have an impact on the way they view life and the expectations they set for themselves and their school. Deprivation of nutrition also makes them vulnerable to disease and ill health which also affects their frame of mind. There have been studies showing that a person born into poverty will already begin with certain cognitive setbacks (Jackson M 2017). Further studies have shown that when people are constantly poor and struggling to make ends meet, the scarcity effect permeates all decisions. This is also true of children in poverty, who underestimate their own intelligence and capability, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Bose, S et al 2019)

3 REDEFINING THE LABEL OF TRAUMA

In India, trauma and psychotherapy are usually associated with the stigma of failure and weakness. It is limited to associations with extreme factors like witnessing suicide or being a victim of both sexual, physical or extreme verbal abuse. In this study, there has been an attempt to prove that all marginalized children going to free schools, either government or private because their family cannot afford to pay fees, experience trauma of some kind. Schools catering to orphans or economically deprived children must design themselves as Trauma-Sensitive schools to be able to understand their students well and to help them to deal with their trauma and unleash their potential to an optimum level.

Educational experiences can shape a child's life for a lifetime. For some children and teenagers, events that challenge an individual's sense of physical, emotional, social and moral self often alter

their sense of self-respect. When self-respect is at stake, it can hinder the acceptance of the school benefits.

A recent survey called AUDIT was done amongst an urban poor slum in West Bengal. The results revealed that 65.8% (150/228) were current consumers of alcohol; 14% were alcohol-dependent; 8% were hazardous or harmful consumers, and 78% were non-hazardous non-harmful consumers. Alcohol consumption directly affects cognitive and physical function, reducing self-control and leaving individuals less capable of negotiating a non-violent resolution to conflicts within relationships. Domestic violence is very common amongst the urban poor and the children are hapless witness to this violence. This often scars the young child and impacts the learning ability in school. In a moderate manner even witnessing the parents struggle through finance and be subject to verbal abuse by landlords and creditors can create a great sense of fear and insecurity leading to trauma in these children.

Trauma can happen from anywhere. It can happen from the home, the neighbourhood or the community around. If the trauma is from the family itself then the child has nowhere to turn to for comfort or safety. In short, most children living in deprived communities experience some degree of trauma. This would leave the child with the fear of the family and be terrified to trust anyone. This fear is without a solution and leads to the fragmentation of the mind-space along with loss of concentration. The teachers may usually view this disconnection as the carelessness of the child rather than look at the associated thoughts, the emotions and the memory processes within the child's mind. When teachers are sensitised about the background of the economically deprived children they can learn effective and sensitive ways of interacting with these children that help them to focus on setting goals and working towards achieving them.

The author recommends that the teachers of government and low-end private schools should have a sustained training program to sensitise them to their students and that can only happen if they declare themselves as therapists rather than just teachers. Government schools should label themselves as Trauma-Sensitive schools and set up systems, curriculum, pedagogy and assessments that is conducive to dealing with children that are going through trauma but have the potential to overcome it with sensitive help.

3.1 Why trauma-sensitive schools?

Several scientific research has proved that our brains are designed with circuits that respond to threats. These circuits activate the state of mind that shuts off being receptive to inputs given by others and make them reactive. Reactivity is commonly seen in children who have experienced trauma. Most of these children have a closed mind and are not open to learning. Optimal learning requires a receptive mind and not a reactive one. Most government schools expect children to be receptively open and not reactively shut and yet don't help in the process to achieve that.

When any individual, especially a child, feels unsafe in any situation then that activates *the fight-flight-freeze-faint* reaction. This state of mind in a child is not conducive to optimal learning. Even very simple events like getting an answer wrong can trigger a sense of non-acceptance and a feeling of threat can be initiated. This trauma can lead to many reactions like avoiding learning situations, fainting or collapse or get aggressive to fight against the constant feeling of threat. This priming state of alarm can temporarily shut down the openness to take chances and to engage with others and this decreases the chances of optimal learning.

It is recommended that every teacher must be trained on how best to work with reactivity and help guide traumatised students to a receptive state of mind in which learning can occur. Unfortunately, more and more children are experiencing trauma, and even the state of our world is so filled with the news of threat that learning these important insights and strategies has never been more important. In the current scenario of the raging pandemic around the world, many children are feeling threatened and a mental health crisis is slowly simmering. This feeling of despair is even more pronounced in poor homes where children have seen their parents lose their jobs and getting three meals a day has been a struggle.

When teachers are informed about the specific needs of their students then the entire classroom benefits. When all teachers are sensitised they can create a generative social environment in which all can learn. Teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of the trauma these children go through and then plan on how to optimize the learning in the classroom and the relational skills that a classroom environment can nurture.

If a teacher is uninformed about these inner processes of trauma, the outer actions of a child will be baffling, irritating, and can lead to frustration as a consequence, and a feeling of being misunderstood or even worse disrespected and disregarded. This can be stopped by an informed teacher and a sensitive classroom. A teacher's understanding of the impact that the trauma causes to the brain makes all the difference. A reactive teacher exhibits understandable yet avoidable frustration as compared to a receptive teacher who exhibits a sensitive and informed response empowered by knowledge, empathy and compassion.

Sensitive handling of children will lead to a healthier and happier school climate. It will also improve academic achievement and test scores. The teachers will have a greater sense of satisfaction and feel safer in school. It will definitely reduce student bullying and stress amongst the staff and students. All this will eventually lead to the reduction of absences, detentions and suspensions of students. And most importantly it will reduce dropouts.

The present Bachelors of Education course which is a prerequisite for a teacher to get a government school teaching job has very little emphasis on how to sensitise teachers to their students' needs especially children that come from deprived backgrounds. The author, therefore, recommends that a correction of the syllabus needs to be made that will dedicate more hours and time to sensitise the teachers to understanding a traumatised child. The education department might argue that there is a lot of emphasis given to this topic for teachers training to be special educators. The author presents the view that all teachers need to become special educators first, to bring in compassion and empathy in the school environment. It is therefore recommended that teachers of government schools need to look at themselves as therapists of traumatised children. It is only then that students will feel safe, nurtured and cared for in schools and want to come to school every day. The dropout rate in these schools will reduce because the school will collaboratively ensure that their students *survive* the school system. And once students begin to survive and thrive in the school environment, their academic performance too will start to improve.

3.2 What are trauma-sensitive schools?

A trauma-sensitive school is a safe and respectful environment that enables students to build caring relationships with adults and peers, self-regulate their emotions and behaviors, and succeed academically while supporting their physical health and well-being.

In a trauma-informed and sensitive school, the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. Those adults include administrators, teachers, staff, and parents. In addition, students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The goal is to not only provide tools to cope with extreme situations but to create an underlying culture of respect and support.

A trauma-informed and sensitive school is a safe & supportive environment that realizes the prevalence and impact of trauma. It recognizes the signs of trauma and the need for learning supports. It also reinforces principles of trauma-informed care into classroom practices

A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Addressing trauma's impact on learning in the school scenario is at the centre of its educational mission. It promotes learning and understanding the student as a whole, and this leads to an increase in positive academic outcomes. An ongoing, inquiry-based process allows for the necessary teamwork, coordination, creativity, and sharing of responsibility for all students.

All children can learn in a trauma-sensitive school because their positive connections to others are fostered and they experience a sense of safety throughout the entire school, allowing them to calm their emotions and behaviours so that they can engage appropriately with the curriculum and the school community.

Ultimately, a trauma-informed and sensitive environment is an integral component of a healthy school climate. It has well-defined policies, procedures and protocols that require the inclusion of all key stakeholders—administrators, educators, students, their families, and the community. It protects staff from indirect trauma by making sure a coordinated approach is in place for both prevention and intervention. It helps schools to better collaborate with other agencies such as primary health care, mental health, child welfare, and law enforcement.

4 PARIKRMA CENTRES FOR LEARNING – AN INSIDE VIEW

Parikrma Humanity Foundation is an NGO that runs free schools for slum children in Bangalore, India. They have 5 Parikrma Centres for Learning close to the slums and are educating about 1800 children from economically challenged and marginalised backgrounds. These are K-10 schools with 2 years of Junior College as well. They have a track record which is not common in India with about 97% attendance, less than 1% drop out and even teacher attendance is more than 95%. The Parent Teachers meeting clock is about 90% attendance where the parents give up their daily wage to attend the meetings. The signature of Parikrma’s success is how well their students do in the final Board and other competitive exams. Many of their alumni are software engineers, designers, nurses, lawyers, teachers, hoteliers and entrepreneurs.

When Covid19 ravaged the country and all the schools were closed for months, Parikrma managed to run online classes by distributing devices to all the children and teaching technology to all their teachers. When asked what is the magic potion for their accomplishments, their answer is simple... they have created schools where the children enjoy coming. This was achieved through what they call the Parikrma Way™ of doing things. The topmost ingredient in the list is creating empathy and compassion as a part of the school culture and climate. Their school motto is Love, Explore and Excel and this is practised every day. Each class takes up a Kindness project that becomes a badge of honour for the class. They even have a Dog Project where the children have rescued dogs from the streets and found homes for them in their school. Each school has two trained child psychologists to guide both the children and teachers.

Parikrma recognises that most of their students come to them with some trauma or the other and it is the teacher’s responsibility to be sensitive to the inner mind of the child in her class and respond with utmost discretion and sensitivity. The teacher responds to the behaviour issues of the students through innovative ways of a discipline called the Yellow Room where the errant child is sent to reflect and resolve. This has been achieved through a series of Sensitivity Labs that the teachers attend that is conducted in house with trained psychologists. All new teachers are immersed in the compassion philosophy of Parikrma during the Orientation program before they start to teach any subject.

Parikrma believes that if a teacher is gentle and loving with children then all other skills can follow. They also believe that a happy and stable child will do well in academics. So while most other mainstream schools are focussing on getting their students to get high grades in exams, Parikrma has been concentrating on ensuring that the children feel loved and cared for. Unfortunately, the government schools that cater to the majority of the country’s children do neither.

The impact of the Parikrma approach of being trauma-sensitive is seen in all the comparative studies that have been conducted as shown (Fig.1, Fig. 2). The graduates of Parikrma feel that they are more confident and clear about their future than their peers in the same community.

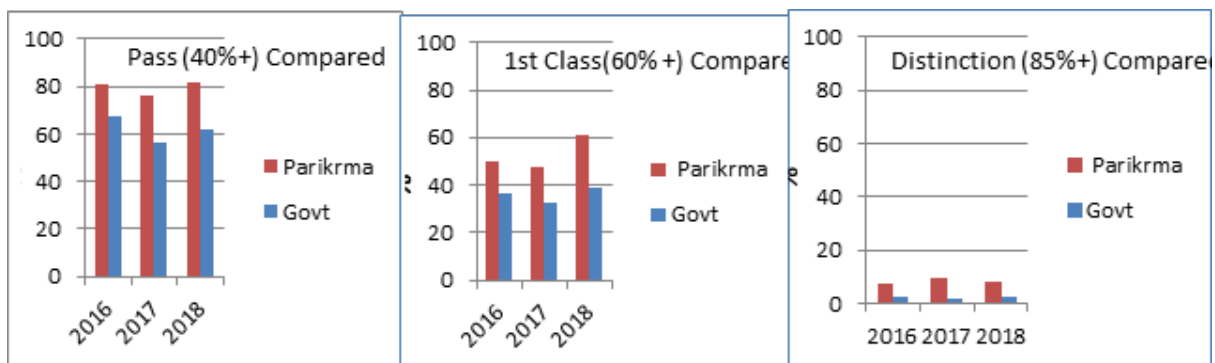


Figure 1. Comparison of final board exam results between Parikrma and government schools

Alumni Validate The Parikrma Model

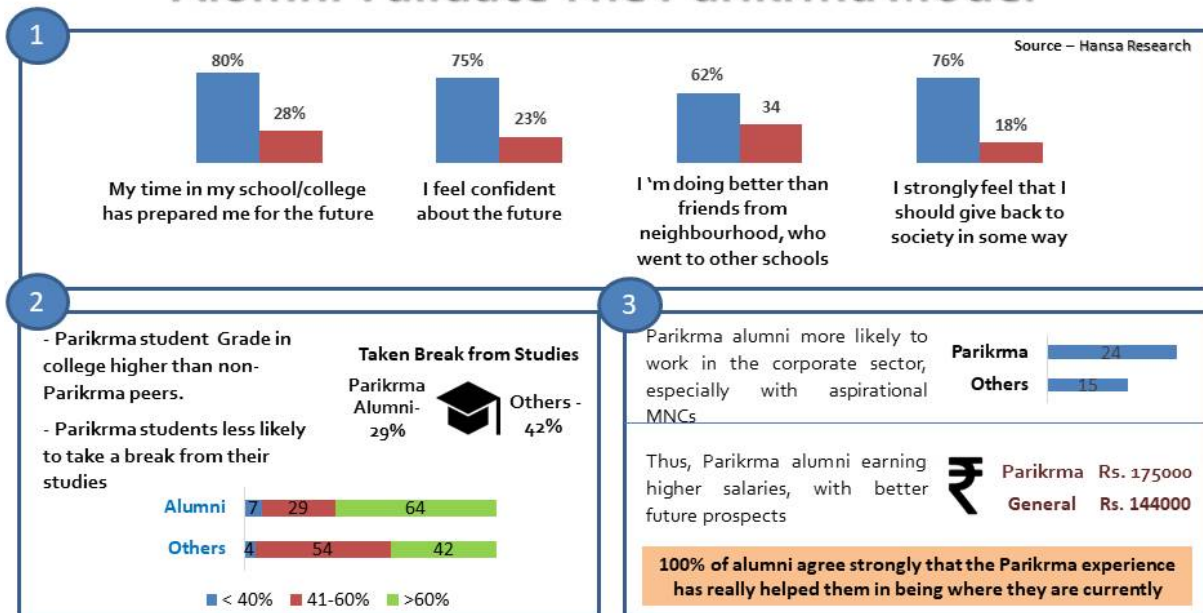


Figure 2. Source: An independent study done for Parikrma 2018

5 CONCLUSION

India needs a school system that actively works for its ideals, one that exposes students to democratic values and rational ideas. Only a government school can play this role in full measure and at the scale that our country demands. The government schools rather than being a system in decline is a system that can revive if it gives its student the primary focus. To do that, they must spend some effort to understand their students' needs.

The author admits that the government school are the only hope and recourse for underprivileged children because they are affordable and have easy access, which the private schools do not. Government schools can be better learning places provided they become better equipped with modern syllabi and technology. But most importantly government schools must encourage diversity and create their schools as safe places to be in and learn, with the support of their caring teachers who have been trained to be trauma-sensitive.

Government school administrators and teachers both in the state and centre should move away from any stigma associated with trauma and acknowledge that the students coming to government schools are more vulnerable and therefore need to be handled with a great deal of sensitivity. All teachers of government schools should be trained in handling trauma with sensitivity to convert their schools into sensitive schools. These insights and skills need to be given special attention in the teacher education syllabus. The teacher appraisal and assessment framework need to be relooked into and they are to be given credit not only when their students perform well in academics but when they are happy and confident to ask questions and have hope and plans about their future. If 1.8 million schools in India are transformed into trauma-informed and sensitive schools, the dropout rate would significantly reduce and millions of children would confidently look forward to their future. An educated nation this way would also have less poverty.

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