

Timeline: 2020-2021

Project Report: Serve Needy

Fellow-Project Lead: Lalitheshwari. K

Stories shape and constitute lives and guide how one acts, thinks and feels. They are created in social, cultural and historical contexts. When people in power narrate the story of the marginalized, they have the effect of filtering the information and experiences of the individual in margins. Hence it becomes important to see who is narrating the story and about whom. The usual story of the ‘orphan’ is that of a child who elicits pity, though a well-intentioned one; it is a story of a helpless child who needs to be molded, re-created and kept at an arm's distance with showers of sympathy. When these assumptions dominate, the wisdom of lived experiences of a young person goes unnoticed and leaves the ground for a single-story, in which the young person is seen as a mere recipient of unfortunate events, helplessness and charity. This single story robs away the dignity of treating them as people with agency and in doing so invalidates the multiple stories of resilience and hope.

Pause for Perspective’s fellowship program is rooted in advocating for mental health in marginalized spaces. We believe that one way to decolonize therapy and mental health service offering is to step away from the couch and go into marginalized community spaces to make visible young people’s ways of being that already create containers for mental health. We believe in making people’s voices known, empowering people with knowledge of mental health, and embodying these know-hows as a way of contributing to a world that is just, compassionate and present.

Pause for Perspective’s fellowship program is rooted in the principles of social justice and embodied activism. Our fellow reached out to one of the Orphanages located in Hyderabad. Colloquially it is referred to as home and the same is used in the article. The home was approached with the hope to provide mental health support and bring to light the agency and voice of children within these homes. The aim was to ensure that children in these homes have access to understand, process and create safety within their emotional needs and in doing so find ways to root themselves in their own empowered voice and hopes. The home has 25

children between 7 and 18 years of age, coming from A.P, Telangana and Karnataka.

The framework for each session is rooted in principles of embodied activism which recognizes the intelligence of the body and works to make it accessible. Each session was held through the intentional frame of ‘safety-sharp-safety’, i.e., beginning with fun activities, then moving into sharp space, like discussing the problems or dominant discourses through story books, movie clippings, skits and other activities and finally closing in safety like check-in with the body or doing simple mindfulness exercises, eg. star-fish breathing. The goal of such a structure is to ensure trauma sensitivity and also to root the power of voice and ways of accessing safety, within the body.

### **Phase one: Building Rapport and Relationship**

Our journey started with icebreakers which helped to build rapport and deconstruct the dominant ideas that inform and influence reality. For instance, reading story books “I like myself” reflected the impact of casteist comments like “Kare” on the young people in the home and it also helped in reminding them to love oneself with all the perfections and faults. In a similar way, the story book “the tiger days” normalized emotions and deconstructed the discourse "boys don't cry".

### **Phase two: Deconstructing Dominant Discourses**

After the icebreakers we moved into the second phase of deconstructing dominant discourses through externalization, which is a narrative idea, informing that ‘People are not the problem, the problem is the problem.’ Food, shelter, clothing, education, pursuing hobbies, everything that a child needs materialistically is provided, but when they express their emotions, they are called ungrateful and troublemakers. Therefore, to privilege children’s voice, a box was created to put all the problems they experience and identify in the world. Below are a few problems that were discussed.

**Periods:** Discussion about periods and puberty generated local stories. The systems that communicate and maintain the impurity were called out. Some ideas that we unpacked where:

1. Periods, in general, are regarded as 'impure'.
2. Rituals that suppress women's spiritual expression like staying away from God during menstruation.
3. Seeing red blood gushing out of a body in violent TV shows is not frowned upon, but when it comes to advertisements about sanitary napkins, blue-color liquid is used, indicating that period blood is shameful.
4. Older women police the younger ones about how it should be invisibilized, so it doesn't make men uncomfortable.
5. This policing is carried forward by the children to the school, immediately looking out for period stains.

Overall, we also unpacked conversations around puberty. We discerned that the experience of puberty was different for boys and girls. For boys, their opinions and decisions mattered in the family and along with responsibilities it also burdened them sometimes. Whereas for girls, there were more restrictions on the body like 'cover your breast'.

By the end of the discussion, they were able to identify gender discrimination, challenge societal myths on menstruation and notice the invisible power of cultural customs on women's behaviour and mobility. And most importantly, the discomfort that occupied the room in the beginning no longer existed and the boys committed to taking up more work if any of the girls wanted to take rest during periods.

**Gender, sex, sexuality:** Institutional bodies like science, family, community, media and other sources decide the identity of the individuals. In spite of understanding that biology is not so clear-cut, its processes don't always conform with gender expectations, the systems and cultures, with their existing political scripts, affect the individual in profound and hidden ways. When these labels are imposed by others, they become oppressive. To challenge these norms, videos, regional movies (Awe and Superdeluxe), scripts of different sexualities, and gender were used. Rigid gender and sexuality norms were debated and discussed.

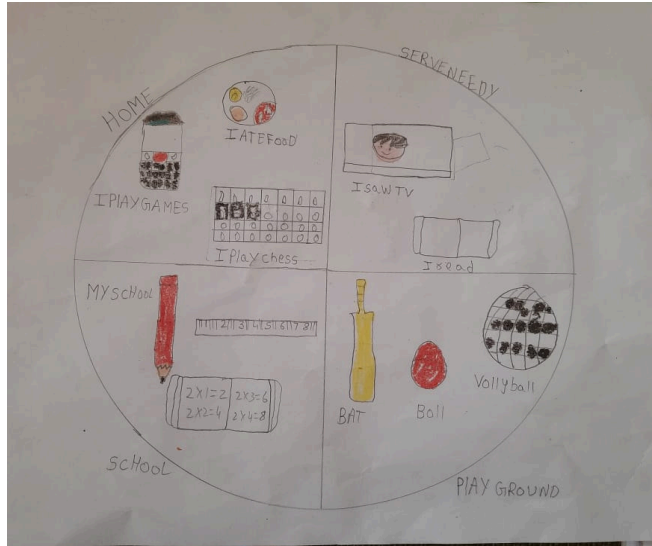
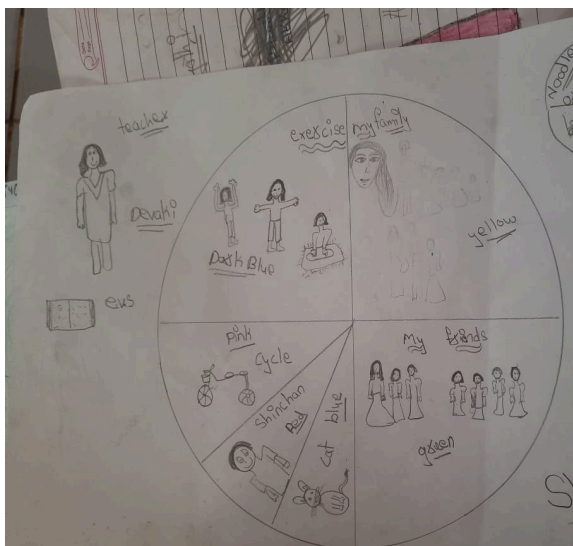
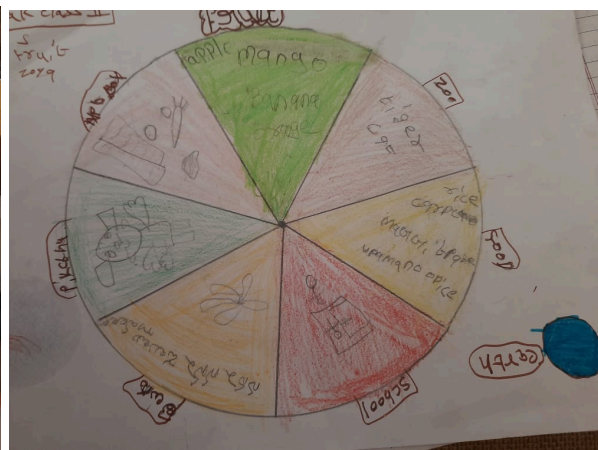
Key themes that emerged during discussion were:

1. The pressure created by narratives ‘be like a girl’ and ‘be like a boy’ and confining their expression for instance being a girl is to be shy, quiet, to doll-up and a boy is to be brave, athletic, loud, head of the family, emotionless and resistant. It was also interesting to see the phrase ‘like a girl’ is used to insult, while ‘like a boy’ is meant as a compliment.
2. Women’s exclusion from positions of power by systematically trivializing their role in the household however, the monetary power redefining the gender roles and bringing flexibility, were highlighted with examples of famous chefs and designers being Men though in most of the households cooking and knitting are seen strictly as women's work. \
3. Movies, stories and activities emphasized that all kinds of sex, genders, sexuality, stand next to each other in a vertical plane but the bias of structures and authorities turn them into horizontal one.

In similar ways different types of violence and its immediate and long-term impacts were discussed and a toolbox for the individual and community were built. For the individual's safety they have come up with skills like running away from the perpetrator if there is no one else in that place, saying No and calling out if there are people besides perpetrator(s) and they have identified at least 3 adults in their life with whom they can share and seek support in times of crisis. At the community level, they want to create a safe space for the victim, deep listening and asking questions to understand and support them but not to victim blame or shame.

### **Young People’s Definition of Mental Health**

Mental health is defined again by the power structures according to their or scientific understanding. Keeping in mind that they are the best individuals to define their mental health, we created a document that defines our mental health and hopes for individuals and for the community. Most of the children want to start a home like this, where there is no bullying, crying is normalized, and love and care are the principles. Following are the images of these young people in action, building Mental health.



### Phase Three: Creating hope and Solidarity

The last phase was to access the children’s hopes and create spaces of support. For this we used narrative ideas of Reauthoring and Outsider Witness.

In the words of ‘Maggie Carey & Shona Russell’- Re-authoring\_- “People experience traumas and losses that cannot be undone. The ways in which these events are understood and interpreted, however, makes a considerable difference to their effects.”

Outsider witness - 'People's identities are shaped by what can be referred as a 'club of life'. This 'club of life' is made up of people whose views matter most to us, who influence our identities significantly.'

To tie the strings of our work together, we ended with a reauthoring and outsider witness activity called crowning. At the end of the second phase, this space has become safe to hold the stories of vulnerability. Moreover, the activity facilitated taking up the position of inquiry and drawing out detailed descriptions of their responses and stance towards the untoward events that happened in their life before coming to the Home rather than seeing them as passive recipients of the events and it also opened up the scope for co-creation of alternative storylines of identity. While each child was narrating their story in the group, which is their emotional support, a preferred club with closely knit relations became the audience to the evolving preferred story. With this the story became richer, more visible, highlighting the speakers' values, hopes and know-hows. One of the beautiful stories that emerged was of a 13-year-old boy who ran from his home, and a government hostel, before coming to this Home. He was teased for this, but when he expressed the importance and meaning behind his decision, it became possible to relate for others and share their experiences. Now he sees his running away as necessity, which led him to find a safety nest. Similarly, there was another young girl who lost both her parents and so was living with her uncle. He would tie her to a pillar, hit her and throw chilli powder in her eyes if she failed to take care of his children. This continued until she saw some children being rescued by the volunteers. Then she decided to move out of her uncle's house and came to this Home. The group emphasised the girl's decision to protect herself and the skills she used to respond to violence.

### **Recommendation**

It is very well known that identities are co-created in relationship with others, one comes to see oneself by looking into the mirrors that others hold up. As these children are surrounded by the caretakers and volunteers it becomes important that they see these young persons as equals and make the space a decolonized one with everybody having a share in the power.

Aligning to the above observation, having a psychologist either in school or Home, who can model embodied conversations and holding safe space through their work with young people in institutional settings such as these is highly recommended.

In a similar way, creating a support group for the caretakers, volunteers to acknowledge the struggles and shortcomings in the system and creating a toolkit to support each other in fulfilling their hopes in working for children is also recommended.

## References

Biegel, G. M. (2017). *The stress reduction workbook for teens: Mindfulness skills to help you deal with stress*. New Harbinger Publications.

Carey, M., & Russell, S. (2003). Re-authoring: Some answers to commonly asked questions. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, 2003(3), 60.

White, M. K. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. WW Norton & Company.

<https://commonslibrary.org/ideas-for-embodied-activism/>