

COMMUNE

A Mental Health Initiative - in partnership with Pause for Perspective

PROJECT UPDATE 2020-22



This report was put together by Aarya, the program coordinator for Commune, with support from Archana Prabhakar, Sneha Kulukuru and Vaishnavi Aravalli. All photos are courtesy of Pause for Perspective, shared with express consent.

I] INTRODUCTION

Commune is a mental health initiative started by two Teach for India alumni in 2020. It is currently being led with the support of a small and passionate team at Pause for Perspective, a local mental health care provider in Hyderabad, India. Our goal is to make mental health support accessible to children in low income schools so that they are able to develop life long resilience and build their own coping mechanisms.

Sneha and Archana taught in a low-income private school in Ramnagar, Hyderabad in the two years of fellowship and worked closely with high school students, many of whom came from single-parent households and deeply troubled homes. While many Teach for India fellows do their best to listen and offer emotional support to children, fellows are often busy and face too many other challenges to be able to focus on emotional caregiving. Given this, school counselors are an essential resource, especially in troubling pandemic times, when students in low income settings had to face numerous uncertainties. Counselors bring experience and expertise which helps equip fellows with the necessary tools to support students.

We believe that promoting a positive attitude towards mental health and helping children and adolescents deal with adverse experiences and risk factors is crucial for their well being as adults.

We know that our children have a bright future ahead of them and consider it our prerogative to make mental health accessible and affordable until the time that the state takes this up as a public health investment.

II] PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Commune was started in 2020 in partnership with Pause for Perspective. We conducted in-person workshops and sessions in two Teach for India classrooms — one, in a low-income private school and another in a government high school. In October 2021, we briefly transitioned to phone-based support since schools were inaccessible due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A five session mental health introductory workshop was conducted with two schools - Sri Sidhartha and Government High School, Bandimet. This helped counselors understand the context of the students and allowed students to explore ideas of mental healthcare and emotional wellbeing. The workshop was designed around the following five themes -

- a) Creating a common definition of “mental health” and the role of a school counselor
- b) Identifying common problems that students faced and responses through the story of Ruby’s Worry
- c) Gender equality and students’ understanding of partnership and communication in relationships
- d) Types of violence faced by students and its impacts on their mental health
- e) Exploring students’ hopes and dreams for themselves, their families, communities, their country and the world, why these hopes are important and what will become possible through them, the ways to hold on and carry them forward

After this first phase of introductory sessions with these two schools, a mental-health helpline service was launched in the month of October, 2021 exclusively for these two schools in order to continue caring for student’s mental health. It was led by a team of 5 counselors. The helpline was open for 3 months but saw little traffic, possibly due to unavailability of the phones, approaching exams, or inhibition to share over the phone.

For the brief period when sessions were held online-only, we faced challenges due to internet connectivity, student attendance and attention. We were able to adapt to difficult circumstances, but neither online nor phone-based support were as successful as in-person sessions.

Once schools reopened, we planned to offer more long-term in-person support to TFI schools. This exercise started with conducting a needs analysis survey with the TFI fellows across Hyderabad. Five counselors from Pause For Perspective were allotted to seven schools from January 21, 2022 to March 26, 2022 to conduct five sessions with each school and also hold individual conversations with students.

Commune Classroom Sessions

The broad framework for each session was based on safety-sharp/activity-safety practice, each session started with a quiz, ice-breakers and exchanging thoughts about the previous session (safety). This was followed by theme based activities where the primary objectives of learning were pursued (sharp). Sessions ended with mindfulness-based exercises like goldfish, starfish breathing, and water-fall, followed by sharing of take-aways and learnings (safety).

Rapport building

Our Intention in these sessions was to provide a space for children to naturally experiment with rules and strategies and become aware of their response to wins and losses. We hoped —

- To understand the perspectives of children, their ability to understand roles of several players and their own role in their activities,
- To explore their likes and dislikes together in a fun and healthy way without these activities becoming contests of ability,
- To understand each other's emotional styles and judgments in cooperation and competition, with children taking an involved role in decision making and in creating norms.

One example of a rapport building activity was using children's story books to build on the themes. “Tiger Days” was a story about normalizing emotions, feeling different emotions at same time or having one particular emotion throughout the day. We discussed that every emotion is natural and also encouraged students to explore ways to efficiently communicate their emotions to people around them.

Another activity involved paying attention to everyday objects and their role in helping us feel grounded during difficult times. Children offered examples of certain toys they could turn to or books that they could read, even when they did not feel like talking to anybody at home or school. We also spoke about mobile-phone usage and how they felt it helped they stay connected to their friends and family.

SILENCE (TIGER DAYS)

Sunday - Rabbit (holiday).
Mon. Tuition holiday happy.
(happy, Joy, excitement)

Turtle After holiday
no more Si turtle.

Bear When you have friends
Thursdays - PT. class
Big brother - Bear
Someone fights - I am bear

Fish When mother shouts
When teachers hit us
Mother/father fights
Sick
Didi's leave class
Leaving place/PPL
Teacher resigns Job

Snail
Sunday
Saturday
(many work, market)
Home work, lunch
Mondays I have to get
up & get ready
Sun, Mon.

Monkey days
Watching Movie
Every day
Play with sis/bro
Park / picnic
Fight with brother/sister
Flying Kites
Watching Cartoons/movie
Crackers
Eating something new
Didi's come

Parrot days
Asking questions
Want to share news
Play Antakshari
Birthdays/holidays
Special days
Celebrations.

Rhino days
- When mother tell work
- When brother ask many questions?
- Sis takes my frock.
- Authority asking questions
- When parents beat me
- When sister grabs my food
(I cry when Parents hit)

Build days
Fighting
WWE
When someone hits me
Parents say bad words
People don't care
Food is not made
Angry with Sisters
Telugu class / Hindi
Boring dance
Someone eats my food
His my friend
I am blamed for
Something not my
Fault.

Fish Sad
Stomach pain
When Father hits
Teachers hit for not doing homework.
When parents go to village
When I miss my parents
When I think about how I die.
When I remember something
When I don't get good marks
When I get punishment
When I go to hostel.
Sister goes
Get hurt

Rhino
When mother tells so many
things
When I am crazy. Rhino =
Crazy
When people look down
underestimate

TIGER DAYS

Tiger
Angry
Fight
Using Bad words
Beat anybody
If anyone disturbs
Beat me
PPL don't let me eat food

Rabbit
Win football match
Get Surprises
Play Cricket
Excited
I run I feel like rabbit
When someone hits & says I run
Like rabbit
Enjoying / make up after fight

Bear Day
When someone disturbs
When I am moody
I wake up late
I have money
When I fight

Turtle
When I fail
When I am cold
When I am relaxed
When my father hits
New to school
When I am shy
When they use bad words
Fight with friends
New to a game
When I don't know
Something I am shy
I get married I
will be a turtle
Teachers give warning

Snail
Tired
Upset
Fever
Mom is angry
When I get up.
Disappointed.
Mood off
Boring
Leg hurt
I am Sad I
am a snail
Don't eat lunch

When someone praises
When we are fat
When someone beats me
When me & brother play
When I am with
my brother.

Alone
= Strong
Sym

Externalizing the Problem - A Conversation

People are not the problem, the problem is the problem

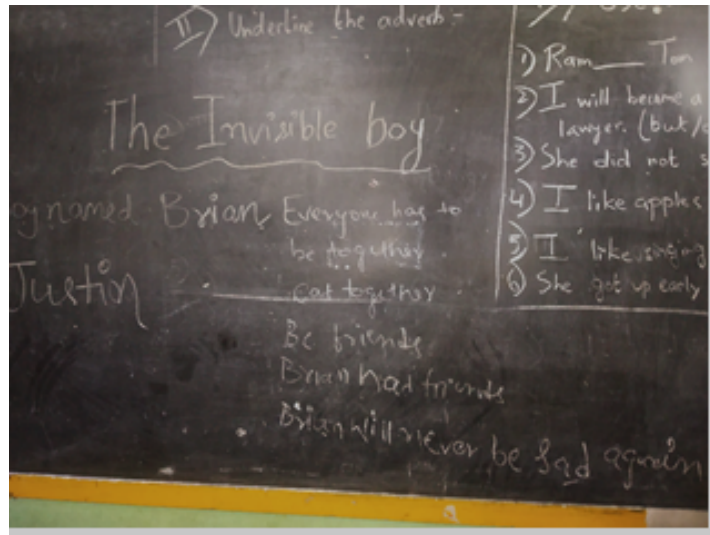
These sessions were based on approaches from narrative therapy which believes that there is value in externalizing problems instead of personalizing them. Additionally, individuals (even children), have their own learned expertise while dealing with problems and often, they are facing problems with their best responses.

In these sessions Shame and Worry were externalized. The intention was to not locate the shame in the children's identity, which is very commonly done by the different systems and institutes around them. During the rapport building sessions the common themes identified were - "naughty child" "always disturbing the class", "inattentive in the class", "lazy", "slow", "disruptive", "rebels", "mannerless". When these labels become the identity of the child it becomes difficult to see them as beyond these categories. Through externalizing Shame and Worry, children are separated from these labels and are seen as much bigger and different from these categories. It helps to question and explore - when does the worry come, what does it do when it is around, how does it make teachers, friends, parents to respond, are there times when worry was not around and how it did they know it was not around and what did they do for it to be not around and what became possible in the presence and absence of worry, are there any benefits because of the presence of the worry. These questions allow room for negotiation with worry, rather than making it all powerful and seeing the child as a passive being, just receiving but not taking an active stand in the face of the problem.

Some of the ways the children have been responding to worry are -

- Talking to friends or teachers
- Crying
- Doing something fun - watching shows, sketching, painting
- Staying silent for certain periods of time

In the upcoming phase, the sessions will focus on building children's stance towards the problems, identifying the roots of the problem, systems that are enabling these problems,



how would they want to respond to the problem, why would they want to respond in a certain way, what values, principles, hopes they are holding on to and what will become possible in the world for themselves as a result.

III] LEARNINGS FROM TFI CLASSROOMS

Despite sharing cultural similarities with the students (given that most counselors hailed from the same state and spoke the same language), these sessions helped our team become aware of the specific context of TFI students. We designed sessions with activities that were inclusive of diverse identities. This allowed us to understand students' meaning-making process and explore stories of their agency.



Through our many conversations, students shared how they viewed and made sense of situations of violence and power, and the perceived impacts such situations had on their self-esteem. We explored the space for emotions - of sadness, anxiety, feeling low and anger. These emotions often make children internalize the problems they face. There is a need for committed work with children to help them appreciate that these emotions are their valid responses to situations and are often a way of seeking safety.

Along with awareness of all emotions, it is important to build a culture of acceptance of all bodies as beautiful and equal. It is necessary to normalize puberty related changes rather than shaming them.

The mental health of TFI fellows is another area that deserves concern and support. The nature of their work and constant interactions with multiple stake-holders results in burnout which has been impacting their engagement with children. Developing tool boxes of self-care and building systems that provide care at community level is the need of the hour.

Taking care of their own mental health would help fellows be more curious to understand the context of students. It would give fellows the perspective to see that often, children's problems are not individualistic and isolated but that a children's

behavior is a response to multiple oppressive and marginalizing systems, especially in the low-income communities.

It is also important to have conversations and workshops with TFI fellows to critically understand the developmental stages of children, personal ethics, values and belief systems and how these may impact our interactions with children. Given that fellows spend a majority of their day with students, and counselors are available for a shorter duration, it is crucial TFI fellows and Commune counselors work as one team, so that they can complement each other's role.

Similarly, these workshops can also be extended to **other teaching and school staff**. In many schools there is passive disagreement and indifference towards TFI fellows from the teaching staff due to differences in ideologies and perspectives. When their authority is questioned or challenged, teaching staff maintain distance from the TFI fellows. This creates two sets of authority figures that children have to heed to, thereby creating confusion among children. In this process, the purpose of enabling and supporting children may get sidelined and create room for the continued systemic oppression of children's voices as passive subjects.

Thus, our work with Commune has shown us the importance of building spaces to have conversations about normative assumptions about children, to contemplate and challenge ways of thinking that disempower them. The question, "What do you want?" should be commonly asked of students, their responses should be valued and worked towards so that we may build communities where children thrive.

IV] TESTIMONIALS AND GLIMPSES

School Counselors

"Children often cannot verbalize their problems & feelings but they show it in many ways (being silent, fidgety or disruptive) because they're aware if anything is not right but we only see what is not right with these children, often termed as behavioral problems we disregard what is causing them distress.

Therefore, as a psychologist who works with children of grade IV, V & VI we ask them to give a character to their problem. They can either draw or name it and from there we get an idea what their problems look like and what is it doing to them. Children are vulnerable because they are unaware of so many things and they should be provided with a space that values their curiosity to learn so that they can have this space to learn,

grow & express freely.”

- Meghna Motwani, Therapist (PFP), Khushbow Vidya Niketan (grade - 4th and 5th) School and Grade allotted



“There's something I've observed every time a child's behavior becomes a topic of interest within a typical Indian family or a classroom setting or amongst a group of parents eager to correct their children and expect them to be a certain way. The discussions, advice, stories quite often revolve around this one saying "Children are like wet clay in potter's hands, we as adults can mold them anyway we desire". Unfortunately but quite accurately, this phrase delineates the way children are ripped off their agency to be the individual they are or they want to be and are instead pushed to adapt, adjust and accommodate the sense of being that their guarding adults desire for them to be. Consequently, a child's developmental process is engineered and influenced early on by their significant adults, leaving less or no space for the child's inner world of creativity and meaning making mechanism to unveil and unleash.

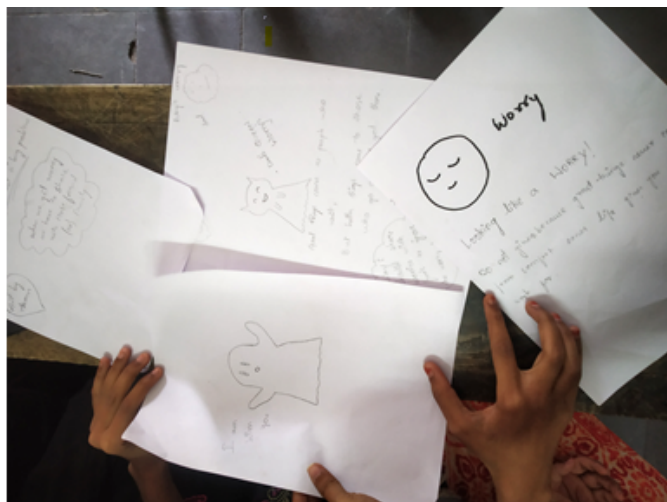
In my work with children ranging from 7 to 15 years of age, the most common pressing concerns that have been brought up, mostly by parents or through the channel of school

authorities, include behavioral traits that are seen as problematic when compared to the so-called "normative" children population around their offspring. The narrative usually consists of questions like why my kid is not like other normal kids and what's wrong with them, often accompanied by an urgency to improve or rectify them instead of a genuine concern around understanding and exploring why their kid is the way they are and what is their preferred way of being.

And thus, our work with children emphasizes on holding space for the latter and encouraging them to embrace and explore their sense of individuality within a safe, non judgmental space. We treat them as young adults who are capable of expressing their needs in line with their preferred choice of being. We believe that each one of them has a unique concept of life and how they want to shape it. We just step in as a guiding force or more like an assistance to help them explore and gather the building blocks they would need to build their individual lives.”

- Rajeshwari, Therapist, Old Nallagutta school, Grade 4th.

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“From what I observed in the schools I’ve been to, children are seen as individuals that require some sort of guidance from adult figures like teachers, parents and other family members. Most things are seen through the lens of this dependency on adults. Hence,

they're not aware of their own agencies or the agencies are discarded in order to do what's right according to the adults. Younger children are taught and expected, even by the teachers, to predominantly feel joy and happiness in all their experiences. Older children are tackling expectations perceived as normal but are beyond their capacity, to sustain themselves (for instance, finding employment while attending school or child marriage). This causes them to internalize the problems thereby shunning their agencies, hopes and preferred spaces. And makes their problems seem irrational leading to conflict within themselves. The sessions involved spreading awareness on mental health and emotional regulation, externalizing and holding space for them, and exploring know-how's, agencies, safe spaces, preferred ways to be.”

- J Shravani, Grace Model School, 4th and 10th standard; Kare Model School, 9th standard; Government High School Kulsumpura, 6th standard.



“While working with children, be it 4th graders or 9th graders, I have observed that they are very aware of themselves and the context they live in. They have also developed ways of being in this context that helps them constantly respond to situations they are put in. Children's agencies are often not seen or respected because the systems and adults around them are constantly pushing them towards one way of being. This sort of overshadows their own skills and unique sense of selves. Even in these systems, I have noticed some young people constantly resist. This resistance can look like not obeying a teacher's "orders", not fitting in or complying, expressing in words and art, finding their own spaces of belonging in school and communities.

Our intention for these kids is to get more language to express what they already know of how they want to be and how they want to be seen, heard and treated. We also want the kids to know that all their experiences and emotions are valid and it is okay to feel and express unpleasant emotions as well.”

- Ayushi Shah, Therapist (PFP), Khushbow Vidya Niketan (grade - 4th and 5th) ; Kare Model School (grade - 9th) ; GPS Old Nallagutta (grade - 4th)
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“My observation was that there are rigid systems in place which expect all children to behave a certain way irrespective of their context. During our work with children a lot of themes around abuse, inequality, descrimination, violence, lack of resources have come up. When children are dealing with these themes in their context it can be a challenge to keep up with the school expectations. We cannot expect a hungry child to focus in the classroom or a child who faces violence everyday at home to be calm and happy. What is presented as classroom behavior has a lot of context attached to it. Our work involved a narrative stance of “children are already responding” and keenly listening to their ways of being and protecting themselves and reinforcing them in powerful ways through group activities and drawing/art activities. Through our work we added a layer to what they already knew, for example a child knows that they can respond to violence by running away. But to help them understand that they can reach out to a helpline number or share with a teacher is something we did with our work. We ask schools to be sensitive to children's context and build on the child's agency.”

- Sridevi Kakuturi, Therapist (PFP), GHS NBT Nagar (grade - 6th) ; GPS Old Nallagutta (grade - 4th); GHS Bandimet (grade - 7th)

Students

“The mental health session was amazing. I have learned many things like being able to ignore tension/sadness, and having fun too. I will re-join this session if I have a chance. It was very great meeting counselors and knowing some motivational stories and learning about it. Didis teach more freely like they crack a little bit of joke in the middle or ask some questions which aren't related to class before starting the class (ex: what do you like for breakfast?) If you like to be more friendly and free in class then everyone will be happy to attend sessions. We play small wrap up games after the class etc.. Attention grabbers also work. And everything else is great. You both explain the topic very clearly and reach out to everyone! Hope this may help.”

- Kare Model High School, 9th grade.

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“I had a really nice time and the flow of sessions was very understandable for me.. I got to learn more about expressing different emotions.”

- GPS Old Nallagutta, 4th grade.

TFI Fellows

“Sessions conducted by Shravani and Aarushi from Pause for students gave them an opportunity to go deep into themselves and understand their vulnerabilities. It was the safe space they created for the students which helped many students open up and reflect for themselves. They really enjoyed the space. The HM and school staff were also quite happy to see students opening up about their emotions and felt happy to see the kids engage in various activities of sorts.”

- Harshitha, TFI Fellow, GPS Old Nallagutta

“We had a lovely time hosting people from Commune, it helped us understand the context of our classrooms better and we spent some good fun time with our students while enabling these sessions as well..”

- Vineeth, TFI Fellow, Kare Model High School

“The mental health of a child is an important factor that impacts their learning within a classroom. Oftentimes, behavioral issues such as aggression or avoidance can stem from underlying emotional distress. The lack of socialization and adequate cognitive engagement due to the pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. Not only is it important to support the child through guidance and counseling, but also train teachers, parents and other gatekeepers to identify signs and address concerns under the guidance of a professional. I am confident that an initiative such as Commune will address this concern in Govt. and low-income private schools where there is a paucity of resources.”

- Namrata Rao, Fellow (2016-18), Co-lead at Center for Trauma Studies and Innovation at BALM

V] ABOUT THE TEAM

Aarya



Aarya is a psychotherapist and supervisor at Pause for Perspective. She draws her motivation and inspiration mostly from her teachers, supervisors and from the stories of people whom she consults. Her work is informed by mindfulness, narrative and queer-affirmative practices. What interests her about the work is to see people tell the stories of how they don't approve of certain systems, institutions and the question she holds on to is - how would you want to tell your story?

Sneha



Sneha began her career as a fellow at TFI, Hyderabad. She continued her journey in the social impact sector at Access Livelihoods Consulting where she headed the pilot to train 10,000 rural women entrepreneurs in partnership with UNDP-Disha. She then transitioned to work in the startup ecosystem as a community manager and later, as a part of the founding team of an early-stage Ed-Tech startup. She is currently a student at the Indian School of Business and is exploring how technology can be leveraged to deepen social impact.

Archana



Archana was Teach for India fellow in Hyderabad between 2017-19. Following this, she was a research associate leading experimental evaluations of education policies in school choice, education technology and public data integrity with the RISE (Research on Improving Systems of Education) team at J-PAL. Currently, she is an MPA (Master of Public Administration) candidate at Columbia University studying the role of data and technology for economic and political development

Vaishnavi



Vaishnavi interned in Teach for India in Hyderabad in 2015. Post that stint, she has continued to volunteer and engage with non-profits focused on education, human rights and mental health. She is currently working in a consulting firm.