The Power Within

Educating rescued children

Critical Analysis & Emerging Narratives

A research report based on primary research conducted with not-for-profit organisations who have experience dealing with children from rescued and traumatised backgrounds.

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salaam baalak trust Delhi.

EkStep

illume

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Table of contents

About the Salaam Baalak Trust

Salaam Baalak Trust Delhi translates literally to a Trust that 'salutes a child'. They salute the indomitable spirit of street children who have chosen to live amidst the harsh, raw, underbelly of Delhi, over home and family which might have become intolerable for them.

The trust was established in 1988, with a vision to offer the rescued children their basic right to food, security, health, education, and love, along with a secure space to sleep, play, and dream.

SBT offers three forms of education - formal school, non-formal education, and open school - which can be availed by the children, as per the need and capability assessed at the time of the first contact. To deal with this efficiently, different curricula for different levels with supporting teaching staff have been implemented.

Active collaborations with multiple reputed schools have been an important step in this regard as this provides the children with better opportunities and greater exposure.

Salaam Baalak Trust - Delhi, wanted to understand the effectiveness of its teaching approach, its strengths and weaknesses - and how the learning program could be enhanced to address the learning needs of its student beneficiaries.

About the EkStep Foundation

The EkStep Foundation ("EkStep") is a not-for-profit foundation that aims to champion ecosystems which build digital public goods, deliver large-scale impact for billions of people and innovate beyond boundaries. The EkStep Foundation was founded by Nandan Nilekani, Rohini Nilekani and Shankar Maruwada in collaboration with the leadership team that was instrumental in developing the Aadhaar project.

EkStep is more than an organisation; it embodies a paradigm-shifting philosophy that catalyses societal transformation.

Executive Summary

"Behind every problem, there is a question trying to ask itself... Behind every question, there is an answer trying to reveal itself. Behind every answer, there is an action trying to take place. And behind every action, there is a way of life trying to be born" - Michael Beckwith

We started this research with the simple problem statement - whether the NFE (non-formal education) curriculum at Salaam Baalak Trust is serving its intended purpose and what could the Trust do differently to improve it? As we spoke to the internal stakeholders from SBT who poured their hearts out candidly, we discovered there is more to it than meets the eye. After all, education is a wicked complex problem and so is homelessness and quick fixes cannot resolve either of these situations.

We live in times when abundance is the dominant zeitgeist. There is no dearth of opportunities for learning or growth. However, what is scarce is our attention span and the sense of value that is ascribed to this plethora of opportunities. What the research also brought to light was the fact that problems of entitlement, lack of ownership, fragmented attention and abuse are widespread in society today among children even from privileged families. Perhaps this is what is the curse of abundance.

The staff in SBT plays the dual role of educator & parent to the child and grapples with much the same behavioural and attitudinal issues that parents encounter at home. The only difference is, that parents at home have the tools of disciplining the child which then prevents the child from going overboard with this sense of entitlement. How effective are these tools is a point to ponder. The tools the staff at shelter homes have are similar but more formalised and with a lot of emotional restrictions

If we have to think of emotional trauma, it is not just the poor, it is also the middle class and elite children who are also going through this, so let us not make this an issue that is grappling only the poor. We have been approached by elitist schools for our mental health interventions. (Rita Panicker Butterfly NGO)

Even in homes where adults are well educated, it is not that such environments are not damaging to a child. Even in these homes, children can resort to lying, self-harm and other unresourceful behaviour since violence does not have to always be physical. Violence can also be verbal. Little children tend to have harsh inner voices; they tell themselves they are "bad" pretty easily since it is natural for children to seek their parents' approval and if they feel their parents approve of them, they approve of themselves. However, parenting styles do not always come from what is desirable or ideal for a child but from how the adults were parented and what they saw around them in the early years. That faux parenting needs acknowledgement,

7

acceptance and forgiveness before the change process can start. When this happens and the child starts to see that, they start to work with the adults since they start to sense an honest and empathetic connection.

The opinions of external experts converge to suggest that one's mental health and conditioning is the portal through which one can traverse unimaginable distances. Some of the success stories of the children from The Salaam Baalak Trust are a case in point to this belief. Fighting similar circumstances and living in similar conditions, some of them have achieved great heights due to their indomitable mental prowess. While the earlier narrative was that such capacity was considered innate to a few, the emerging narrative is about deconstructing the building blocks of this way of thinking and offering it to a wider set of children.

"The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven." – John Milton

A safe space

A key observation from the research interviews was the open discussion of challenges within the system with honesty. To us, this signalled that all the stakeholders, past and present, have a lot of faith and trust in their leadership and are able to openly express themselves since the intention of this open dialogue was that it would pave the way for the betterment of the children in the shelter-homes. The safe space is an invaluable part of the culture created by the leadership team at SBT and one that could pivot their change efforts going forward.

WHAT LED TO THIS RESEARCH

Background and context

Background and Context

Salaam Baalak Trust has been working for the past 35 years towards rehabilitating rescued children who have suffered neglect or abuse or have been separated from their families. While the work of the trust has grown exponentially in terms of scale and the number of lives it has touched, what has also grown alongside is the complexities of the ground realities.

Today, SBT runs seven 24-hour full-care residential homes for children and teenagers in the NCR, 11 contact points day care centres & one 24/7 child help desk(CHD) . The number of beneficiaries is nearly 10,000 children every year.

There are drop-in centres, outreach programs and stay-in shelters.

Besides creating a safe space for children and ensuring children get access to education that is suitable to their aptitude, the work of the trust extends to every aspect of the child's well-being - mental, emotional and physical.

The children who find their way into the centres come from diverse backgrounds (whether they have been to a formal school v/s no formal schooling at all), their aptitude and abilities, their age and even how long they would stay at the SBT centres (since the endeavour is always to trace the families of the children and if possible reunite them with their family).

Therefore SBT staff has to keep all these possibilities in mind and structure the learning for every child according to their unique circumstances.

Even if they do ABCD with one set of children today, they will have to do the same again tomorrow with the new set of children who will be coming. Hence how does one then go from ABCD to XYZ? At any point, they need to cater to a wide spectrum of possibilities for learning or mental-emotional well-being of the children and the program has to account for that.

The goalpost is shifting and the journey to learn is infinite. No one from the outside can ensure the completion of one's learning journey.

The question that arises then is, "Can a set of adults impart basic skills and building blocks that will enable the learning journey in children? Create the reasons for learning and inspire them with the transformative power of what learning can do and how to get past the challenges". Create a system that will replicate the success. Break it down, create building blocks, articulate what works and replicate it. What can enable the joy of learning in these children ?

We started 35 years ago and there was no real understanding of street children or their needs or requirements or even an understanding of their background and where they come from. Today we understand their reality and their background. Children run away for several reasons - some children are born with the DNA to discover the world. In many ways, they are like feral cats - inquisitive

and wanting to discover the world. One child, who ran away from home at 7 years told us that he ran away from home since he wanted to see the world and hence did not stop running away. But a large number of children run away because of the poverty, abuse and deprivation they see at home. In tandem with that, they have no access to school. There could be the step-parent syndrome where the parent is seen as bad. Also, there could be a situation where the parent is unable to take care of a child with special needs here and the child is abandoned. In the past when these children came to us, 90% of them would be unlettered. Today that number has reduced to 60%. (Trustee SBT)

While the explicit objective of the research was to understand what could be offered to rescued children as part of the SBT Non-formal learning curriculum, we also sought to understand the ground realities and complexities that could come in the way of this learning in a shelter home and extend the enquiry by talking to experts on what could set into motion a momentum of learning that could become self-sustaining and instil in the children a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their growth and development?

About the Research

Salaam Baalak Trust along with the EkStep Foundation commissioned primary research, which was undertaken by illume Research, Bangalore in September 2023.

The purpose of this research was to understand first-hand from the stakeholders of Salaam Baalak Trust, to what extent and in what ways the learning program offered by SBT has been beneficial to the children.

This report contains the findings from the research that was conducted between September 2023 & January 2024 amongst the stakeholders of the SBT which included the Trustees, Mental Health Professionals, Teachers, Special Educators, Social Workers & Alumni.

The research sample also included a set of external stakeholders who have expertise in working with children to seek their input on what could add value to the children beneficiaries at SBT and learn from their experience of working with marginalised children (not necessarily abandoned or abused) what programmatic interventions could be relevant and meaningful to them.

The detailed findings from the primary research were divided into two parts.

01

Based on the interviews with the internal stakeholders, we attempted to deconstruct the problem i.e. explored the mindset of the stakeholders, the student attitude around learning, motivation, making use of available opportunities and resources, how gender impacts aspirations etc. Part 1 of this report unbundles the challenges, sets the context and also offers a springboard for stakeholders working in the sector to ideate on probable ways to address these challenges.

02

Part 2 of this report focuses on emerging narratives that show the points of convergence between the views of all the stakeholders - internal to SBT and external experts. Given the complexities and the challenges, some organisations have made some headway on some if not all aspects of the problem. While the possibilities have been laid out, through this research, our endeavour is to foster conversations between eco-system players to collaborate on offering to children in shelter homes solutions and approaches that could create a self-sustaining momentum of learning, such that the children could be motivated to make the best use of the opportunities available to them.

The Research Methodology

The interview method and approach to the discussions

The research was conducted using a mix of semi-structured interviews with all internal stakeholders to assess the impact and the challenges based on self-reported attribution.

The qualitative research approach placed the 'voice of the individual' as key to the evaluation, ensuring they share their experiences in a non-judgmental and respectful context. The focus was on gathering evidence of the challenges faced by stakeholders through conversations and anecdotes giving us context-rich information about their lives and work/living context. In many instances, especially the SBT alumni recalled clear changes that they have observed over the years and the complexities that have arisen due to the increase in scale.

This research aimed to gather evidence about the causal processes of change, not to quantify any variable and hence a qualitative method was adopted which would allow the researcher to deep dive into issues and the context and understand nuances around the program and the challenges on the ground.

The research was conducted in the local language in a conversational style, allowing plenty of time and encouraging individual stories to emerge.

The interviews were conducted at a time and in a space where stakeholders felt uninhibited to share their stories without the pressure of being judged.

Though the discussion guide was detailed and comprehensive to do justice to the scope of the research, the line of questioning adopted included open-ended questions, with supplementary prompts in the form of examples and stories heard during other interviews conducted for this research, that acted as conversation starters.

The questions were designed to reflect all areas of people's lives assumed to be affected by the project's theory of change. The questions were framed in such a way as to gather outcomes along with inputs to understand the cause-effect process holistically. This also ensured the landscape was open enough to allow for unintended and unexpected outcomes to emerge.

The data analysis methods

Data that was largely textual & was analysed in two ways:

a) Using deductive reasoning to support predetermined themes and b) Using inductive reasoning by spotting repeated patterns and drawing conclusions. Both approaches allowed us to give equal weightage to the depth and breadth of the stories uncovered.

The thematic analysis involved:

A) extensive human coding of each minute of the interview to ensure comprehensiveness of the data captured and no data loss. B)

13

Allocating data under pre-determined themes using the Excel software for each interview. C) Identifying wider themes and patterns by reading the views of different stakeholders on a particular issue/theme. D) Comparing different data points mentioned by the same individual on different issues to identify consistencies/inconsistencies.

The data capture and analysis were conducted by a set of individuals who were not involved in conducting the interviews and group discussions. This not only served as a quality check but also helped gather an objective viewpoint sans any researcher bias creeping in about what changes took place for whom, how and why. The report pulls out all the relevant quotes from the source narrative data to illustrate and elaborate on key findings.

Sampling considerations

The approach to sampling that was adopted was to select cases through rigorous purposive sampling, rather than seeking a large representative sample. This meant attempting to sample to 'saturation', where each new interview added little to the existing set of information. Our experience from past research design indicated that 3-4 interviews per homogenous segment of respondents met the goal of saturation beyond which we often heard repeated stories. Hence we recommended starting the research with that number as a thumb rule and expanding the research sample only if required.

We adopted a dynamic sampling approach which meant as the research progressed and we reached a point of

saturation with what we heard from one set of stakeholders, we identified emerging threads that we could deep dive further into and identified a new set of stakeholders to be interviewed to help us unravel an erstwhile unexplored facet in the research.

External experts were identified based on their expertise in working with children from marginalised communities or based on a snowballing approach. After hearing the complexities of the situation that SBT was trying to find solutions for, one set of experts, helped us identify another set of experts who they felt could add value to the research.

Lastly, budgetary constraints were kept in mind while keeping the sample size optimal. Salaam Baalak Trust being a not-for-profit organisation, it was critical to think carefully about the incremental cost of additional research as compared to the incremental value derived from it.

The Stakeholders We Spoke to

01

17 interviews were consulted with - internal stakeholders

SBT Trustees, Special Educators, Teachers, Counsellors, Alumni, Social workers & centre coordinators

02

12 interviews were consulted with - external stakeholders who were members of the leadership team or founders of the following organisations that have experience dealing with children from rescued and traumatised backgrounds.

- Butterfly NGO

- The Akanksha Foundation, Mumbai

- Ayur Gyan Nyas, Delhi

- Yuwa School, Jharkhand

- Sol's ARC, Mumbai

- Dream a Dream, Bangalore

- Gubbachi Learning Community, Bangalore

- MukkaMaar, Mumbai

- Shiksharth Foundation, Sukma

- Khel Khel Mein, Delhi

- TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment, Delhi

- Makkala Jagriti, Bangalore

Part 1
Unbundling the Problem

Changes in the Learning Space

The ideal of holistic, individualised learning, and the reality of increased class size and numbers

Thematic, fragmented, interventions

The improvements in the public school system

The balance between what freedom is, and what the consequences of freedom are

Changes in the Learning Space

The idea of holistic, individualised learning and the reality of increased class size and numbers.

With the growth of shelter homes, the set of children coming into the centres is not homogenous. There could be children with special needs, those on the autism spectrum, children with learning disabilities and those who have never been to school at all. These are just some of the instances we heard from organisations running shelter homes.

A few years ago, organisations observed this lack of homogeneity with the set of children and some of them have worked towards creating learning programs catering to the needs of this diverse set. **While such children benefit from individualised learning programs, the growing scale of operations makes the situation complex.**

In the wider societal context too, there are attempts by ecosystem players to make learning more holistic.

> There was a feeling that some children were not progressing despite everyone's best efforts and hence there was a feeling that there should be special educators who should be handling these children. There are about 15 children in the centre with special needs. We found these children were not able to sit in a class, had behavioural issues and were not able to follow the academic plan that had been created for them. They were functionally, socially and academically delayed and lagging behind children of their age. They were also not able to participate in group activities. For instance, there was a child of fifteen, who came to the centre. I instructed him to give me the book and then turn off the light. He just did one of the two things and then looked confused. Children between three to five years old can do free-hand scribbling. But we had an 8-year-old at the centre who was not able to scribble. Children who avoid eye contact or engage in repetitive behaviour and also do not play with other children — these are signals for us. We create individual plans for the child - based on their needs and age. For instance, if a child of fifteen is not able to write his name or is not aware of day/month then we create learning plans based on those basic needs. (SBT Special Educator)

Since we focus on children and their unique needs, we also can see much more improvement with these children as compared to the children who go to regular schools. We also motivate children as per their interests. If a child loves drawing, then we use drawing-based activities to motivate them to learn. (SBT Special Educator)

Each child has a different need, appetite and aptitude for learning. **Though we do have a non-formal education curriculum in place, our teachers find giving one one-on-one attention quite challenging.** When we teach them as a group, the children who are lagging do not find things relevant and hence lose interest in learning. "Woh aisa sochtein hain… kya hai…kuch nahin ho sakta…"(Counselling psychologist - SBT)

I have worked with regular children too and also with community children. The situation at SBT

" is different — the child could come to SBT at any age — hence the curriculum needs to address the needs of a six year-old and eighteen year old. Multi-grade teaching is what we have to keep in mind when we design everything. **At any time there are children of all levels — the child who can tell you the 4 times table and the child who does not know what 4 is.** The other consideration is whether the child is going to stay in SBT for the short term or the long term. What we need to know, that is, the extent to which the child will learn at an early age, is not the pace at which the child will learn at an older age. We also have children who come to us at an older age who have no exposure to Hindi or English. They only speak their mother tongue. We have to work with these children right from the basics. (Teacher SBT)

There was a child who came to us since he got separated from his family during a Muharram procession. He must have sat down and the procession walked past him. He was lost and when he reached our centre he used to cry saying he wanted to go home. In the art class, the art teacher would tell him to paint his home or the surroundings near his home. He painted a Girijaghar near a railway track. We would keep circulating his picture to trace his family and ten years later we found them. He went back home and brought back to the centre his brothers to study since their family was extremely poor. Then there was another girl who used to work in a fancy Gurgaon gated community and the lady of the house would burn her with a hot knife and finally tried to strangle her. That kind of trauma plays itself out. **When we are designing anything, we have to be conscious that the program should not just be an excellent education program but give them a level playing field for these children.** In earlier days, our endeavour was, once a child was found at a bus or a railway terminal, after a preliminary examination, we would encourage them to stay in our shelter home and focus on giving them practical education in language and math both in the written form and verbal. The child then lived with us through the child's education process. Even after passing out, we thought of them as our children and got them married. We

would encourage all children to at least complete their 8th standard and encourage as many as possible to continue learning as far as they can stretch it. We have had children who have done their higher studies not just in India but also in international universities. (Trustee SBT)

Changes in the Learning Space

The idea of holistic, individualised learning and the reality of increased class size and numbers.

The flip side to too much customisation in routines and learning programs is that it could create confusion amongst children. Some organisations have worked around this by creating structured programs that allow some room for individualised attention in a niche way.

The SEE Learning curriculum adopted by the Akanksha Foundation is similar to the one offered by the Ayur Gyan Nyas Foundation. It was developed under the aegis of the Dalai Lama Trust.

We spoke with a shelter home alumnus who spent their time at two different NGOs. In the first NGO, there was a system and routine that applied to every child in the centre. The alumnus found it motivating— since everyone was studying, they would too. At the next NGO, there were different sets of children doing different things. At this NGO they found it difficult to gear themselves towards learning since there were some other children who weren't going to school.

We have adopted a 3-tier model - tier 1 is modules meant for all children. For instance personal safety or circle time discussions. This is looked at as a preventative space. Tier 2 is children with similar concerns. For instance, it could be anger management, children with single parents or addiction issues or children with special needs where the parent needs support. Tier 3 is the children who need some therapy. This is usually a one-on-one intervention. The counselling would be with the children and teachers for their individualised learning plan. In the past year, we have adopted the SEE learning curriculum which is implemented during circle time. Before that circle time was used to discuss issues that were critical to a class or the school. We look at what is developmentally appropriate for a child. Even if they have not come from traumatised backgrounds, their social-emotional skills need to be developed nevertheless. Sometimes, the socialisation that a child is exposed to in a family may not be appropriate. These modules are designed not to fill any deficit but designed keeping in mind the developmental needs of children. That is the Akanksha approach to working with children who have different intensities.

It has 3 domains: the personal, social and systems.

THE PERSONAL DOMAIN would cover elements of self-awareness and elements of self-compassion; which becomes critical for children who have experienced trauma since such experiences raise questions in the child — did I do something wrong, why did this happen to me? There is the aspect of self-regulation. Though this would be relevant to all children, this module is also useful to children who have undergone some sort of trauma. It gives them the tools and that sometimes helps address the 'hyper-vigilance' that one generally notices in these children. Their nervous system is always in a fight-flight-freeze mode even though there is no real threat. The module informs children about the way their nervous system works and real threats v/s imagined threats. If any individual is in a hyper-vigilant state all the time, their mental and physical health will start to deteriorate in the long run.

The SOCIAL DOMAIN addresses interpersonal issues that may be relevant if the child has had a breach of trust from someone close to them. Or it talks about compassion for others which is important so that they do not grow up with the feeling that the whole world is bad.

THE SYSTEMS DOMAIN explains how we need everyone to survive and function. It brings in an appreciation for people and systems we do not even know. Someone working out there is responsible for making sure I have electricity at my home today. It is a wholesome curriculum in that sense. The curriculum has been created keeping in mind school-age bands. (Akanksha Foundation)

Changes in the Learning Space

Thematic fragmented interventions

There is a feeling of being overwhelmed in the education sector. The feeling of running on a treadmill, where despite running frantically everyone feels like they are still in the same place.

Today the choice that any educational institution is grappling with, is not about what to teach their children beneficiaries, but what to prioritise amongst the myriad options available, each intended towards developing some facet of the child's personality.

Learning something new not only warrants that the staff and children step outside their comfort zone but also comes with demands on an individual's time and mental energy. There is training involved and the task of customising the program to one's context. Additionally, there are requirements for monitoring & reporting that are tied to every program. And sometimes 2 - 3 different programs are introduced to a set of children and adults at the same time. Against a backdrop of increased scale and the number of lives an institution touches, showing impact numbers become significant. Though thematic interventions are one way of dealing with scale, the fact that they create a sense of fragmentation cannot be ignored.

From a five-year-old child to an adult everyone is gripped by this frenzy and

that is exactly what the program of AGN is trying to address. **The problem is obvious. The solution is also available, but the problem creates a barrier for the solution to be received. How does one then enter the busy mind and focus the attention on a program that deserves it**?

Earlier we used to look at the child as a whole. Ek bachhe ko sab kuch dena hai. In recent times thematic interventions have started to happen globally. That led to a thematic focus and de-emphasised the child as a whole. A set of people only started to focus on literacy, and another set on access. The adult support that came to the child also became thematic. Earlier when NGOs used to support education, they supported the school as a whole or the community. These days some are teaching life skills via football and others via frisbee, some are teaching the children STEM, and others are emphasising ecology. It is a Western discourse. It is an assembly line approach. I use this metaphor within my teams - **if the child needs a shirt, earlier we used to ensure that we give the child a shirt, then global organisations came along and said — impact at scale and hence we started to create just collars for 1 lakh children.** The impact numbers have increased. Is fragmentation integral to scale? We have tried to argue about the merits of holistic education. But the counterpoint we often hear is about 'access to quality education' and in ensuring that, we have narrowed down our thinking. In some way, the reasons that justify scale are valid in a large and populous country like ours. However, fragmentation as a way to ensure scale comes from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. There is a funding perspective to this. Why we have bought into a Western narrative because civil society organisations in India are ultimately being funded by an organisation or a philanthropic partner in the West. The organisations that are not funded can still retain their perspective. **The way we misinterpret**

scale is when we expect one organisation to solve the scale problem rather than an ecosystem to solve the scale problem. We want the one organisation to impact 10 million children rather than to think of it as 10 organisations each impacting 1 million children. Decentralisation has never been associated with scale.

At Sukma we also feel the education of children should be couched in the social-cultural understanding of their context that is where they're coming from. That schematic attunement has been missing as a whole. **This has been a result of the emphasis on quality in education, though no one has been able to define the quality of education — what good quality education is. In the quest for quality, people have only been picking up specific element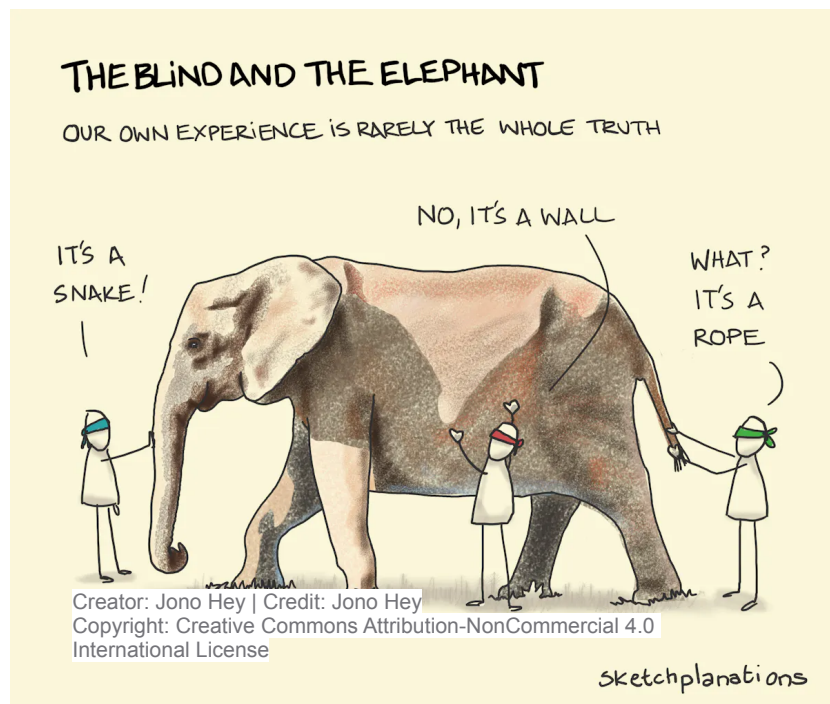s here and there.** It is akin to the analogy of 'the blind men and the elephant'. Someone has been looking at just the tail of the elephant while someone else has been looking at the trunk. When I worked in a government school, I came across seven different civil society organisations, trying to promote seven different initiatives. There are seven different directions in which the teachers are being pulled because of programmatic interventions that have been happening. Each program lasts a few months or a year. The sense of understanding of teachers will also be fragmented and confused. Very recently FLN has been introduced. The NGOs are telling them to do the assessments, and make TLM. SBT has been doing a lot of things over the last 20-odd years.
But despite doing everything there is a feeling that there is something amiss.
A lot is happening on the ground but these fragmented interventions are not leading to the ultimate goal of well-being for the child.

(Shiksharth)

The biggest challenge is to convince the school administration. Schools are mostly here to make money. We have beautifully designed books to supplement our curriculum and schools ask us for discounts. Or they tell us that there is already a value education curriculum in place and they wouldn't want to take on anything else. **We signed an MOU for two days a week with the school but schools rarely give us more than a day. Finding time is a challenge.** If you need to conduct two full days of off-line sessions at schools you seldom get that. Finding time for a refresher training is even more difficult. **For these values and skills to be learned by children and to see them getting manifested in behaviour continuity is a must. I also understand their struggle. Whenever we go there the teachers are busy.** There are so many programmatic interventions that are happening from not-for-profit organisations that almost all stakeholders in the education sector are always in a busy and frenzied state. **Staying present with whatever is being offered and making the most of it is getting more and more difficult. This is the approach that mindfulness takes i.e. bringing your attention back to the present and preparing you with 'discernment' — what is the right thing to do when faced with temptation. Schools often do not understand the importance of these ideas** and hence they could be deprioritised.

THE BLIND AND THE ELEPHANT

OUR OWN EXPERIENCE IS RARELY THE WHOLE TRUTH

IT'S A SNAKE!

NO, IT'S A WALL

WHAT? IT'S A ROPE

Creator: Jono Hey | Credit: Jono Hey
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sketchplanations

> We often hear comments like, "Abhi padhai pe zyada zor dena hai yeh sab zaroori nahin hai."

There is a lot of CSR rush flowing towards shelter homes these days and Children are so busy — go to school, and from there go to tuition or some class, and in the evening donors would come to distribute food. This would be followed by visitors from CSR divisions of organisations. While I understand that CSR is important, it should be done differently such that CSR visitors specifically visit on days when the children do not have regular schedules - that way children also enjoy the affection and the attention that they get from the CSR visitors. (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

Our education system is such a large white elephant in the room. We have MOUs signed between the state and civil society organisations. **There are several such organisations and each one comes with its objectives, its impact numbers. For the child — how do all of these come together? What happens to the child who has been cut short on one program and pushed into another program which is duplicating what the child has already done?** Do they complement each other or not? Can we put the HM as the deciding person since she knows what is happening on the ground? Does scale work in education? **Ultimately the experience rests with the child who is an individual. How impactful is that experience — has that been studied?** We are doing a lot of things with great intent but what is the impact on the child and what has been the child's experience with it. No one is asking such questions. Can we work in a more collaborative way, where the state gives the first level of permission, but ultimately leaves it to the school or the cluster to decide on whether there is a need for certain programmes? **There will be a number bias but it is important to understand what kind of numbers we are measuring. Are we only measuring the number of participants or are we looking at the number of children who move from point A to point B?** Children have to see meaning to feel invested and hence it may boil down to getting the child involved in the one activity which captures his or her imagination. (Gubbachi Learning Community)

Changes in the Learning Space

The improvements in the public school system

On the positive side, some NGOs have witnessed a lot of support for the children from the government schooling system in Delhi.

They feel that the basic quality of education in government schools has improved which helps them channel their resources towards enhancing the education that is being offered to students rather than having to reinvent the wheel.

Like the guardians of children going to regular schools, the teachers at some of the NGOs keep in regular touch with the teachers at the government schools to share information about the children at the centres.

With RTI, every child has to be in school. With that, what we started doing was that children who were bright and focused were sent to private schools with the help of sponsors. The government schools have also improved. They have been helpful and cooperative with the needs and requirements of these children. The teachers also start understanding the children and their strengths. (SBT - Trustee)

What has changed in the recent past— the Delhi government school system has improved dramatically. Earlier we had visited a government school where children studied and found that there were no proper water coolers or toilet facilities. Hence we went to the then education secretary and asked whether we could fund these facilities for the government school. He told us that Rs. 95,00,00,000 on paper have been allocated towards school infrastructure and it is unfortunate that on the ground nothing gets done. That was then. Now we do not worry about the quality of basic education in government. schools. We can supplement things at our end. Earlier the government school system was so challenged that we would send our bright children to Gurgaon. But what happens on paper and what happens on the ground in schools is very different and hence at our centres, we do not question the mainstream school education but enhance it. And for the children who fall through the cracks and do not go to mainstream schools, for them, we need to create an ever-evolving curriculum. (SBT - Trustee)

Changes in the Learning Space

The balance between what freedom is and what the consequences of freedom are.

There is a lot of emphasis given to the agency and voice of the child not just at the NGOs but also as part of the emerging discourse on education in the wider society.

The sense of agency is even more important to nurture in children who live in shelter homes since they need to move out of these homes once they turn eighteen years old, as per the law. Once out of the shelter homes though, some of the NGOs continue to support them in whatever way is needed. These children cannot live in the centres and living on their own, whether in a college hostel or with flatmates, involves decision-making at every stage. If the children need to feel comfortable making big decisions, they need to get into the habit of making small everyday decisions.

While the idea of agency looks romantic in theory, in practice it is difficult to manage. Agency has to be interwoven with accountability for it to work. The idea being quite new, it is often misunderstood by not just children but also adults. At present the situation at some of the NGOs is paradoxical, there is so much democracy in the system, that some stakeholders mention that the food menu is also decided in consultation with children. On the other hand, things which are very

fundamental to children, for instance, freedom of movement, are issues on which they sometimes feel circumscribed and use opportunities to step out of shelter homes to break out of that violation. While children who live in families test the boundaries or sometimes go back on their choices, they can be held accountable by their parents. The same if done in a shelter home becomes tricky since there is a thin line between holding someone accountable and forcing a decision upon them.

How accountability is interpreted in the system also depends on how the adults in the environment are conditioned to think about it. Holding a child accountable could be viewed as unpleasant or it could be viewed as a precedent being set for other children. The time-out could be seen as a punishment or a time for reflection and collective action on how to avert a situation like that in the future. How children will receive these instances is how they are presented to them. Children need to be made aware of the fact that consequences are not set in stone. With behavioural change, the consequences change. But they also need to know that a boundary is a wall that does not have a trap door to escape.

Democracy without responsibility leads to entitlement. Democracy with responsibility leads to empowerment.

There is a very thin line between regulating and controlling. It is very deep work, it is not a skill that you acquire overnight — how can you be firm while still being polite? In the short term, the structured and regimented approach helps and it has its merit. You learn the value of time, efficiency, productivity, discipline and all those things are necessary given the extent of competition in India. The concept of agency is not just misunderstood among students but also organisations. Employees want freedom but no accountability. All the successful democratic schools talk about agency and accountability going hand in hand. Striking this balance is not a matter of regimen but one of skill and one that is very difficult to transfer. That is why alternative schools are difficult to scale up since these have been started by passionate founders who have not been able to transfer the skill. The skill can be learnt over time. (Shiksharth Foundation, Sukma)

At the shelter homes, they get good clothes good food to eat and people talk to them well. Sometimes the older children take care of the younger children and hence it also feels like a bubble. Mostly, it is the staff who is doing things for them and giving things to them right from clothes, pencils, to notebooks. Only when they move out of the centres do they start to realise that they need to start doing things on their own. **This creates a habit of dependence**. **The lack of agency would also impact the motivation to do things in life.** Life skills, if inculcated at a young age, will help them in the future since they need to think about what is good for them or not and make a lot of decisions on their own once they move out of the centre. Many children are reluctant to move out of the centres. (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

If there is a child who is doing something naughty, there is a class of parents who do not even think twice about raising their hands. We could have an adult who does the same in the shelter home. They could be coming from a place of discipline and not from a place of violence. But it is against the law to do something like this. **In the mind of the child, it normalises violence.** These children see violence all the time. How do we explain to them the soft and gentle approach? Attempts are on to work on these issues with the staff and the children - to imbibe this level of

sensitivity. **This is a complex space to navigate since these things call for a societal change, not something that can be learnt from textbooks. These issues are universal — no child in any environment is insulated from it. The key is to understand how these issues are dealt with when they crop up.** Our process should be so strong and clear that when an issue comes up we should know the trajectory to solve it and put our staff on that path. The kinds of mental health issues are not very different from children who come from regular families. There are enough children in every stratum who feel neglected and do not get love and affection from their parents. There are no specific issues that only happen in our shelter homes that won't happen anywhere else.(Trustee SBT)

Children flourish when they feel supported by clear and caring boundaries set by adults. While there will be times where adults will help children with decisions, but it's also important to create spaces where children can share their thoughts and make choices. In my opinion, defining where the control lies for specific matters and ensuring it is well-documented and understood by everyone is necessary. This clarity of thought creates a structured environment where authority is balanced with empathy.

Authority and empathy are not opposites. In fact, empathy should guide the use of authority. You cannot work effectively in childcare without empathy—it becomes the foundation of every decision we make. For example, if a child skips school once due to recent trauma or distress, an empathetic response might be to address the root cause rather than impose strict discipline. On the other hand, if a child repeatedly skips school, crossing established boundaries, a more structured disciplinary response may be necessary to help the child learn accountability and social norms.

In both cases, the goal is the same: to act in the child's best interest. Empathy allows us to tailor our responses to each situation, ensuring that every decision supports the child's growth and well-being. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

We don't engage with the word agency so much but for us giving children choices is what is important. **I think 'giving agency' is itself an oxymoron.** I would go back to the very basic differentiation between a child and an adult. A child does not, or is expected to not, know the consequences of his or her actions. Whereas an adult is expected to know the consequences of his or her actions. **So somewhere the best interests of the child probably have to be arrived at jointly.** But if you engage with the child with respect, and give the child choices, then I think we should trust the intelligence of the children. By choices I mean pre-defined choices since we are working in the confines of the system. So the line of questioning we adopt is, "hey, we are going to this adventure camp. Do you want to have an awesome experience or not?" And now if that is something which a child is rejecting, then it's an alarm bell for us. Maybe there is some underlying issue that the counsellor has to look into. Also, if it is a one-off situation that could be overlooked, but if it is happening continuously that is also a reason to investigate further. (Makkala Jagriti)

The Challenges in Dealing With Rescued Children

Customization at scale and the diversity of children

Labelling of children

Lifeskill and independence

Constraints of space & feeling of confinement

Ownership and motivation - from staff and students

Behavioural issues of many children all at once

Frustration of the adults that comes from feeling they have hit a wall

Challenges in Shelter Homes

Customisation at scale and the diversity of children.

As mentioned earlier, the children who reach shelter homes, via different channels are extremely diverse. There could be differences concerning their learning abilities, whether they were abandoned, abused, orphaned or happened to get lost and could not find their family. There could be children who have physical disabilities. Those who are old but have never entered a school and those who have experienced schooling in some way.

The extent of diversity poses challenges at many levels. **For the adults who are trying to devise learning curricula and teaching methods for these children, there is no one-size-fits-all.** There are attempts made to customise learning for those with special needs, however, the sheer number of such children adds another layer of challenge.

Sometimes, children themselves find the diversity difficult to grapple with. n one centre at a given time, there could be children going to regular schools; those pursuing the Non-Formal Education at SBT and those who are new to the centre and could be in transit before they find their space. **They could have different routines and children might not be**

able to easily wrap their head around these differences.

> At TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment, we prioritise quality care by limiting the number of children to 20 per home. This approach ensures a family-like environment where children can heal and build meaningful connections. Initially, it was challenging to advocate for this model, especially given the immense pressure on authorities to accommodate a high volume of cases daily. However, we are deeply grateful that the authorities understood the importance of this approach and have supported our efforts so far.
>
> Smaller homes allow for personalised care and create a sense of belonging, which is vital for children who have faced separation and instability. Large institutions, even with more staff, often struggle to provide the same level of attention and emotional support. Smaller groups also help in managing routines and conflicts more effectively, fostering a stable environment for the children.
>
> Over the last 15 years, we've been able to focus on our mission: providing a nurturing, family-like space where children can truly heal and thrive. This has been instrumental in creating a model of care that prioritises the well-being and rehabilitation of each child. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

Labelling of children

When one experiences unresourceful behaviour on the part of an individual, it is hard for anyone to understand, whether a child or adult that the unresourceful behaviour is not mal-intentioned. That the individuals themselves are grappling with an emotion that they are unable to handle. And most importantly, it is a 'behaviour' and not the 'identity' of the person.

As a society, we are conditioned to think of behaviour and identity synonymously. For instance, if a child is a slow learner or prone to show anger, we are quick to label them 'yeh toh aisa hi hai…he/she is like that.' **The way we speak to children becomes their inner voice and the children start to live up to those labels.**

Very often, the tendency to label is a blind spot in a person i.e. they may not be aware that they are pre-disposed to think a certain way, making it difficult to correct. **There is a gap between attitude and behaviour. While we all know that children should be spoken to with kindness and respect, in practice find it difficult to do.**

Your incident is not your identity. Sometimes in a shelter home it happens that everybody inadvertently reminds the child, why he is here. What happens is that a child gets labelled due to one incident. what needs to be reinforced is the belief that the incident is a momentary thing that does not define you. That is why experiential learning of the person who is going to facilitate or interact with the children is critical. They need to experience what non-judgment is to be able to pass it on. Experiential teaching facilitators are not available in the market. You have to invest in their training. (Makkala Jagriti)

Life Skills and Independence

The shelter homes occupy the dual space between a home for the children and an institution like many others that are governed by the law.

The children spend their time in the shelter homes till they are 18. There is a small set of those whose families can be traced and are safe to return. But for the rest, the shelter home is a space that is responsible for their physical and mental well-being, their education and for imparting all the life skills that a child imbibes by living with a family.

Life skills are a crucial component of what these children need to learn since the law mandates that the children would need to live outside the shelter home after they turn 18. The complexity of this issue becomes manifold when dealing with special needs children.

There are a few facets to the challenges concerning the imparting of life skills.

A. Not everything a child learns at home can be replicated via a learning activity.

B. Imbibing life skills happens subconsciously when a child is within a family, whereas learning activities can feel inundating. A simple act of accompanying a parent grocery shopping teaches a child so much about budgeting, prioritization, mathematics, safety in a public space etc.

C. The normal household chores that a child learns through participation in a home, can be perceived very differently when carried out in an institution due to legal guidelines on what a child may or may not be permissible to do. Cooking for instance is a life skill but could also become a safety hazard.

> " In the initial days, our teachers went overboard with being available to them, customising the curriculum and assessment styles to what the children needed, being available for extra classes and homework etc. But from our alumni, we learnt that when they went into the outside world they were not equipped with skills to be independent learners and faced difficulty and hence we had to course correct. (Yuwa)

How to make them independent is a big struggle. Our endeavour is always to make sure the children who we deal with are independent. When they are nearing 18, getting them involved with appropriate vocational training and also later placing them in jobs becomes difficult due to their special needs. Some children have a physical disability and then they need lifelong support. For instance, if they have to cook their food or wash their clothes later when they live on their own - such activities could become difficult. (Special Educator - SBT)

Constraints of space and the feeling of confinement

Shelter homes in urban settings deal with a limitation in terms of space available to children.

Since many rescued children have a tendency to run away as data has shown, such behaviour can be repeated by them. In some children, this tendency develops irrespective of the circumstances they find themselves in.

Hence there are guidelines once again specified by the governing authorities on the movement of children outside of the shelter homes which are created in the interest of protecting these children. Children do go to school and vocational training centres regularly though they are aware of the restrictions on their unbridled movement.

Taking permission to step out makes them feel they are 'confined'. The lack of agency also impacts their overall motivation to learn and grow and make use of opportunities available to them.

This release of physical energy is an important variable that impacts the mental well-being and orientation towards children's learning.

Addressing the feeling of 'being jailed' is important especially since there is little that can be done about the physical infrastructure and the feeling of being confined adversely affects the overall well-being and motivation of the child.

I can't speak enough about the power of physical play in dealing with these children. I say this from my experience of dealing with a school that gave us 30 of their most notorious boys who had a lot of issues, to work with. Three of them brought swords to the school and they assaulted the watchman and they just would not listen to us. What boys needed was someone to tire them out, to challenge them. Their manhood was running in their minds. So we brought in a trainer and we told him, what do we do in Mukkamaar. He did some classes with them in such a way that tested their physical capacity. And when that happened, when they were so exhausted, suddenly they began to listen. So when the body is physically exhausted, the revolt is gone from the body. The way we use the bodies of boys is very different from the way we train the girls to use their bodies. Even while hiring people for my

team **I feel the more intellectual a person is, the more their body has shut down.** People do not understand how to do activities that involve the use of their bodies. We do an activity called Iron Box with our children. You have to close your eyes and you have to imagine that you are in a box. And that box is now becoming smaller and smaller. And your body is shrinking. And you are completely shrunk. And how are you feeling? And it's dark, it's made of iron. And you have to physically try to push it back. You just have to act. You have to visualize. And if you are in tune, you will be able to act like it's there. It's not rocket science. But a lot of people have so much inhibition. They can't even do this. **As adults, we have not used our bodies enough.** We have never been groomed to let the body flow naturally. For example, girls don't want to do even jumping jacks. Jumping jacks are normal warm-ups. We make them do Burmese wrestling and it unleashes the animal in girls. It takes them a few sessions to open up but we have seen them transform. Initially, they are very self-conscious of their stance, their clothes etc but soon we start hearing them shouting and cheering. **Emotions get manifested in our body language, very subconsciously and we are trying to use the body to get back to the emotion.** (MukkaMaar)

At TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment, we understand that children need freedom to explore, play, and engage with the world around them. Simply building tall walls, installing CCTV cameras, or creating barriers will not prevent a child determined to run away. Instead, we focus on addressing the underlying needs that lead to such behaviours. When children are confined without opportunities to release their energy or satisfy their curiosity, it can lead to frustration, increased tensions, and even violence within the home.

To mitigate this, we've implemented a balanced approach that combines safety with engagement. While we have strict safety rules and routines to ensure accountability, we also prioritise outdoor activities and creative outlets. Children regularly visit the nearby park, participate in sports and art sessions, and enjoy trips to museums, exhibitions, and picnics activities planned with their input.

Rather than assuming children lack interest, we actively seek to understand their perspectives and adapt our approach to spark their curiosity. This helps create a more stimulating and supportive environment, ensuring that their energy and creativity are channelled positively. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

Sports help children develop leadership skills. Everyone has a leadership role and they take turns. They also have accounting responsibilities in rotation. They have a set of rules for their team - if someone is coming late what will happen or if someone doesn't have a very genuine reason for that what will happen? When our visitors come the girls are very welcoming and confident in speaking with new people. Visitors tell us it generally takes them 3-4 days in other places to break the ice. Rules for the team and consequences for not following those rules are also made by them and enforcing the rules. The adults get involved only 20% of the time in very crucial decisions. We have a school management committee. We do a very clear communication about what is possible and what is not. We show them data - if you take too many holidays - you will not be able to complete 4 chapters and it will affect university results. So if we do not accept the request, we always give them reasons. (Yuwa)

Ownership and motivation from staff and students

The generation of children growing up today is fortunate to have opportunities easily available to them but unfortunate to have developed a sense of entitlement.

People who are given whatever they want soon develop a sense of entitlement. The institutional set up by its very nature is created to provide for whatever the recused children need.

With the growing sense of entitlement comes a depleting sense of motivation to push themselves hard to achieve things. This is an atypical situation in which everything that a child needs is made available by the trust till the child turns 18.

Behavioural issues of many children all at once.

Children are not designed to be emotionally self-regulated until a much later age when their brain fully develops. In regular homes, with fewer children, the behavioural issues that children exhibit when triggered are relatively easier to deal with as compared to a shelter home with

so many diverse children, with different needs and with different levels of skill sets for self-regulation.

Often a small trigger can spiral into something bigger due to the cascading effect of one child's behaviour triggering the behaviour of many others.

When there are multiple sets of children (some neurotypical, while others neuro-diverse) exhibiting trigger symptoms it becomes difficult for the staff to contain the situation. The staff feels disempowered since they know they cannot take any strong disciplinary action even in case of extreme behaviours from children.

The frustration of the adults that comes from feeling their efforts are not yielding the desired results.

The staff at shelter homes find themselves grappling with multiple issues at hand, that are many times interconnected with each other, making it difficult for them to detangle the knot.

The issue of motivation is connected to the issue of confinement to the issue of the number of children to be dealt with at a given time. All of this has to be dealt with against the backdrop that many if not all children have suffered serious trauma and abuse in the past which so often acts like muscle

memory and is difficult to shake off in the short term despite all the therapeutic work that is done with the children.

Each child is unique with his / her own challenges, preconditioned beliefs and what might turn around the situation for him/her. In some cases discovering what would work for the child to feel a sense of purpose, can take years.

It is not uncommon for the staff dealing with such children to feel let down in the interim when they do not see any results despite spending more time and energy with the children at shelter homes than they do with their own children back home. Can teachers be sensitized to process orientation and recognise the needle has shifted even if it is in a minuscule way? If there is an outcome orientation (as opposed to a process orientation) then nothing short of that outcome will feel like success

Working with children can involve emotional challenges. When children express themselves, you can face threats or disconnect which overwhelming and hurtful for the caretakers. This emotional strain can affect the team's ability to provide care, creating a cycle where hurt feelings lead to harsher interactions, which children may mimic or amplify.

Breaking this cycle requires open communication within the team. Creating an environment for caretakers where they can share their feelings and reflect together on children's behaviour is important. Understanding why children feel or act a certain way helps the team respond more effectively.

Sometimes, children's reactions reflect their past experiences, such as authority or hierarchy within the organisation. By recognising this, the team can adjust their approach to foster more positive interactions. Ultimately, addressing these challenges collectively helps build trust and ensures a healthier, more supportive environment for both children and staff. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

Complexities and Barriers to Learning

The beliefs around learning	**Lack of stable emotional support systems**	**Unrealistic learning goals or lack of transparency of learning goals.**
Interpersonal issues - with peers and staff	**No opportunities for release**	
Coping mechanisms to deal with past abuse		

Complexities and Barriers to Learning

Beliefs around learning

Many a time rescued children do not have a strong educational foundation so school admissions according to age is a challenge.

These children who come from the streets have high levels of resilience and survival skills and they feel they can survive without education. Facilitators grapple with making these children learn and grow. Girls come with strong conditioning and have no clear idea of what they want to do with their lives. Often what the girls have witnessed back home - the abusive situation of the mother - impacts the way they think about their own lives.

Once inside the shelter home, the promise of a 'good life' after completing their education feels only like a theoretical possibility, since they have never experienced what a 'good life' is. All of these attitudes create an internal barrier to striving.

At the shelter home, all their basic needs are provided for which makes some of the children feel like - there is no real need to study.

> Children who have abundance have low motivation. They feel they do not have much to contribute or build. If we can introduce these children to people who can be their role models - people who have risen the ranks from similar backgrounds like theirs. **People who can share their low phases with them and talk about how they overcame that thinking. This could be useful for all children.** It is always helpful to have role models which is lacking in general. We often talk to our children about Mahatma Gandhi etc. but those are too far away for our children. They need role models who are younger, more dynamic and have gone through similar situations. (Akansha Foundation)

Children are disillusioned with the schooling system - there is forest produce here and they know that even if they don't go to school, they will be able to get food to eat. They see people around them who might have done an MSc are still farmers, so children wonder - what is the point of studying? 2. The role modelling is missing. One who has studied and found value in education has a moral responsibility to inspire others. It has to lead to tangible benefits for the children - evidence that education will lead to an increase in salaries. 3. Schools are a very boring space. They are so boring that even teachers do not like to go there given a choice. There is no talk about art and music. All they are talking about is completing the syllabus, FLN. (Shiksharth)

Many things come in the way of learning -most importantly if the child cannot relate to the content they will not learn the lesson. Next, if they do not have a strong foundation for learning they will be reluctant to go to class. they need to be disabused of beliefs like 'padh likhke kuch nahin hoga'.
We were one day talking to a group of children and asking them what they wanted to be when they grew up and one of the children said, "mujhe chappal chor banana hai, usmein paise bohot hain". **The superego of the child that needs to develop is also influenced by what they see and hear around them and what is considered 'normal'. If a child grows up listening to the statement - kisi bhi tarah se paise kamane hain, he will not develop a sense of right vs. wrong.** (Counselling psychologist SBT)

Sometimes children come from remote rural areas and even if they have been to schools, the atmosphere is very different. When they come to the city, they can at times get intimidated by what they see - large school buildings, everyone talking in English, and girls

wearing shorts. We had a girl who saw all this and said "main yahan padh hi nahin paaoongi". Yahan hum kaise rahenge - yahan sab alagh baat kartein hain. In private schools, they teach all subjects using English as a medium. (Teacher - SBT)

There is an age at which grasping new things comes naturally to someone but these children have not been exposed to much learning or resourceful experiences at that age. Now when we expose them to such things they stare at us with wide eyes. So we have to expose them to ideas in such a way that it really makes them feel inspired. Dekhke hi lage kuch alagh hai. **Sometimes children might become conscious that they are so old and still learning things that babies should learn**. We had two children one about 7 years and the other about 15 years. We gave both of them the same assessment worksheet to solve. They did not know the worksheet was the same but the older child took offence - hum dono ko same kaam kyon diya…main toh usse bada hoon. Umr ke baad hum cheezon ko sochna, samajhna chod detein hain. Kai baari humari dignity itni badi ho jaati hai ki uske aage hum nahin jaa paate. (NFE Educator - SBT)

The girls tend to veer towards vocational training like sewing or getting trained as beauticians. We have always wanted our girls to dream big. Today we have girls who have been successful as fashion designers or entrepreneurs. Sadly many of them still think that their ambition is to get married. Though we do not encourage this - many of them get into their first relationship early and soon they start expecting and get married. That is the scenario as of now. However, we also see that girls are far more able and intelligent and mature than their male counterparts who tend to take more time to come to terms with the reality of the situation, though girls are less hungry for success as compared to boys. This seems to be in the DNA of our society. This is very challenging for us - to get them to do something meaningful with their lives, even though they are way more empathetic, cleverer and faster. (Trustee SBT)

Coping mechanisms to deal with past abuse

Repression is a common coping mechanism in individuals who go through extremely traumatic and abusive situations.

During the research, some stakeholders spoke about the inability of the children to retain what they have learnt. This would create a barrier in their mind about learning further.

The reason for this could be the tendency to repress. Over time it becomes a habit and there could be a possibility that the children might not be able to discern or filter out what information is 'safe or useful' for them to retain.

What we have learnt from our experience dealing with children is that children are bright and come with competencies. **What was different about these children was their inability to stay with Ideas. They were very responsive to what we taught them in the class but the next day everything was wiped out. And we spoke to the counsellor who deals with children, we were told that this is the coping mechanism - they do not want to remember.** That becomes an obstacle towards long-term learning which needs intense therapy and understanding. It was not that there was no learning but they would take very long to retain concepts - 2X or 3X the amount of time as compared to other children. Given that, with focussed effort some children were making very good progress - they were deeply engaged in everything that they did whether it was sports or arts or academics. For the children who were not making progress, we had to get them enrolled in a one-on-one session with a special educator. (Gubbachi Learning Community)

Children find it difficult to move out of the trauma of their past. Some children could take 6 months and some children could take years.

Younger children generally suppress things soon but then these problems resurface again when they grow older. (Teacher SBT)

Interpersonal issues

The child gets impacted by everyone's attitude in the ecosystem. While adults try their best to empower children, there are still several factors that adversely impact the child's motivation to learn

If the same empowering environment that the child experiences at shelter homes, is not found at the school level or the societal level then the child is not able to meet his / her potential.

Adults in the ecosystem do not intentionally discourage the child but could be blind to their own biases or conditioning or burnout manifested as frustration or giving up on the child.

While adults in the environment can facilitate learning, the motivation to learn has to come from within each individual and at times staff find it hard to uncover what are the factors that could create this 'inner drive' since it is different for every child. Also, sometimes unravelling that motivation could take weeks or at times it could take months or much longer. It is also commonly acknowledged by all stakeholders working with children that they regress with respect to their learning and emotional regulation and these regressions are particularly acute at the time of adolescence which happens with all children, not just rescued children. Howeve,r with the latter, the intensity of regressions and

consequent cognitive and behavioural issues could be higher.

Mental health is a serious problem. We had a student who was a very successful photographer who earned 70-80 lakhs but threw it all away because he was depressive. The earlier children did not have access to mental health help. Today we have a fairly robust mental health program. Children are assessed if there are any learning gaps. Though this mental health program can be upgraded our teachers who come from communities are reflective of society and they have unresolved issues. Their role goes far beyond that of a teacher. The teacher is playing the role of a parent in the child's life. If a child does badly, we hold the teacher accountable. In our system, there is zero tolerance for any kind of punishment. If a teacher hits the child the teacher could get suspended. **The children on the other hand are like feral cats. They know how to exist despite us and not because of us and we can play you and me and sell us all in the** market and we won't even know. They take advantage. They know that the teacher in the room is constrained and cannot do anything but they can. Hence the challenge in an environment like this is how does one empower the teacher. Give her the tools that can make the learning journey of a child engaging and inspiring. And make sure that it's all not so complicated that the teacher feels overwhelmed and abandons the process. (Trustee SBT)

Unrealistic learning goals or lack of transparency of learning goals.

There is an age at which grasping new things comes naturally to an individual. Some children come to shelter homes at a late age (12, 14) with little or no exposure to formal school. That poses a different challenge to the teaching staff since these children become conscious that they are so old and still

learning things that babies should learn.

Sometimes they have neurodevelopment difficulties. There could be complaints from school, that some children are usually not able to pay attention in class, hence they are not able to grasp what is being taught or are socially isolated. The school may not be aware of or be able to identify the child's neurodiversity and staff members in such cases do sensitize the school staff about the child's diagnosis.

The children are segregated into enrolment for private schools versus government schools basis their aptitude. Some children feel discriminated against and insist they want to go to a private school.

Lack of stable emotional support systems

Children who live in shelter homes do not have the usual emotional anchors that children find with their first family (parents and siblings). Living with a family gives a child a sense of belonging, a shared sense of values and most importantly the emotional connection they feel with their family, nurtures in them a sense of responsibility. Children want to live up to the expectations that family members have of them and feel disappointed when they let their parents down.

This emotional void created by the absence of a family leads them to get into relationships early. Once in a relationship their focus and energy shift from pursuing their academic goals to wanting to get married at the earliest.

They feel that getting married would help solve all their problems.

In the earlier days, we were three staff and 24 children for a much smaller organisation. We even as trustees had a much more hands-on approach with the children. We knew every kid. Our association with all our alumni continues to be like that because it was smaller and therefore we were involved. Today we have close to 13000 children and 300 staff members. You know, it's a machine now as opposed to a homely environment. So the effort always is to try and create that sense of empathy. But the system sometimes works, contrary to that. In earlier times, if a child really wanted something, taking the child out or taking the child home by one of the staff was not necessarily unheard of. Today you can't. During COVID, when the staff was locked into the centres for 10 days at a time, it really helped alleviate some of these problems. But now we're back to post-COVID where again, you know, staff has only X amount of time with Y children on that issue. It's not one staff, you know, it's not like a house mother who is responsible for everything. Here the social worker is doing his or her work. The mental health person is doing their work. The educationist within the system is doing math or physics. And this fragmentation of roles and responsibilities or this specialisation of roles and responsibilities does come with its advantages. But it also leads to an eroding sense of ownership and connection. We know we are not able to provide 100% to 100 % of the children. Some children necessarily therefore fall through this gap. If 3 staff members are attending to a child for 2.5 hours during a crisis, 35 or 50 other children could be missing out on the attention during that time. Every day there's a crisis of some kind with some child. That is the nature of the beast. (Trustee - SBT)

As an adult what I find challenging is too much reporting and monitoring at govt. level. We are not able to spend time with children. Children also sometimes get disappointed and ask me when we are busy with work, "aap abhi baat kyon nahin kar rahe ho." The frequency of the reporting is not fixed. Sometimes we could be

asked to submit 2-3 reports in a day and on some days it is even more. At times some of these children could be ones with special needs. They feel connected only with certain adults. There is a girl with special needs who spends a lot of time with me. If I am busy, she is not able to stay calm and starts acting up. It happens because these children do not understand 'patience'.

On the flip side, these days children have a lot of options. Earlier there was one teacher who taught children everything. Now we have at the centre all the staff members trying to teach the same thing to the child - whether it is the teacher or the counsellor. Maybe our methods are different but we are all trying to teach the same thing to the child. The topic of 'hygiene' is being discussed by the teacher, the medical staff, the counsellor and whomever the child encounters and hence the children feel - that the same thing is being repeated every time leading to boredom. Now the number of activities also has increased. They have regular studies and projects at school and also when they come back to the centre, some volunteers get them to do things. All things make things tired. The intention is to make sure they are not bored. (AGN SEEL Coordinator - SBT)

The need to channel physical energy is not optional. It is a prerequisite to learning. Unless that happens, their ability and willingness to learn reduces. I would recommend if the children are at the centre for a very short time, just focus on their physical development.

Physical sport also teaches a child self-regulation since each sport is played within rules. Some sports need a large outdoor space, while some others don't (table tennis, small ball games, badminton, an Indian game called Sur). There is a GOI website that lists these native Indian games. I would recommend that any organizastion dealing with rescued children should have a robust sports program. The kind of channelization that sport gives you is what art and music also give but that takes more resources. Most children love to play and a lot can be built through it. The sport can be any team sport. Their growth is better through sport. We saw some children who were non-responsive starting to turn around while nothing else that we did worked for them. We had a girl who just would not talk and after two months of playing kho-kho, we saw her smile and engage with the other children. Sport gave her a space to open up and express but the expression happened after she experienced joy and fun through play.. (Khel Khel Mein)

No opportunities to find release.

Many experts (external stakeholders) spoken to during the research pointed out a direct correlation between the opportunity available to children to engage in outdoor free play and their mental well-being and ability to focus on learning.

This has also been corroborated through some of the other primary research we have conducted with students in their critical years of study (10th grade) who were stripped of their opportunities for free play and sport and found it difficult to concentrate due to the pressure-building up inside them.

Integrating Rescued Children Into the Mainstream School System.

Lack of clarity about grade-level expectations on academics

Learning gaps that created during the years at the mainstream school.

Creates a sense of belonging

Integrating Rescued Children Into the School System.

Lack of clarity about grade-level expectations on academics

While there are guidelines in the mainstream schooling system on the minimum age a child should be to be eligible for admission to grade 1, the information on what the child 'needs to know' at each age to help him/her feel at ease with the pace of learning at each age/grade is not very clear.

What makes things more ambiguous is that all schools, including government schools, believe in creating broad guidelines for each subject at each grade and encourage the teachers to create their lesson plans. This creates a lot of variance on how a topic is being approached by a teacher in a school, and in what depth and detail. This variance makes it difficult for organisations working with rescued children who are consistently trying to create bridge programs to help integrate the students who come to these shelter homes into mainstream schools.

> The school system expects a 6 year child to be in grade 1 but if the child has had traumatic experiences then the child needs that much more time to overcome those and settle down with their emotions. The regulations are very stringent - they always ask tum kaunse class mein ho. But it is not about which class the child is in, it is about how capable the child is of learning. Then there is this regulation about vocational training-the child cannot pursue vocational until 16-17 years. Even to register the child for the NIOS, the child has to be 14 and has to have a certain level of literacy and numeracy. If you think about the need of a child-they need to feel validated, they need to feel useful, they need to feel that they are contributing meaningfully to society. If the child is young there is no bridge course or fast-tracking required since the child will pick up anyway. If the child is older then a fast tracking would be needed else the child would feel demotivated. Independent pathways of learning would have to be curated so that the child can determine the pace of learning. As much as it is important for the child to get acquainted with formal learning it is also important for the child to invest time in art or get to know the world via experiences and field trips. The children even if they come from open slums do not have access to these opportunities and hence we need to create opportunities that are missing. Sending children to leadership camps might also help, so will circle time discussions and SEL. If the child is feeling good then half the problem is solved since the child would then take over their learning, one wouldn't have to labour over it so much. We can't have a one-size-fits-all approach. We have to be sensitive to the needs of every child. When a child has missed out on so many developmental opportunities, you need flexibility. (Gubbachi Learning Centre)

While we endeavour to have every child join the school system, the guidelines are about age and not about a child's learning level. At a certain age, if a child is expected to be in a certain grade but cannot relate to it, that leads to many behavioural issues. The child would avoid going to school. It is very important to understand the underlying cause. MANY A TIME FINDING THE UNDERLYING CAUSE IS NOT EASY. we cannot over-simplify and conclude that the child is uninterested in learning. A lot of times the trauma they go through impacts their interest in not just learning but also in life.

If in the schooling system, there was clarity on what kind of skills and subject matter familiarity is required at what grade, it would be easier for us to focus on those skills and that content and

students would also find it easy to integrate into the schooling system. Many a time when the goal is not clear and mandatory we do not make that much of an effort. If there is a mandate on what the child should know - our efforts would also be more serious in that direction and the child would also not have a problem adjusting. Teachers would also take it seriously. The kind of healthy pressure - one feels before an exam

(Counselling psychologist SBT)

Learning gaps created during the years at the mainstream school.

Once the child has been admitted to a school, the staff at SBT mentioned that they keep in touch with the school staff to keep abreast with the progress of the child and also share relevant information with the teaching staff at the school about the children who live in shelter-homes regarding their academic progress and challenges.

However, sometimes despite these efforts the staff find that children have developed learning gaps while at school. By the time the staff find out, the child has reached an advanced age (8th or 9th) and the learning gaps have compounded over time.

The staff hypothesise the reason for this could be that in the primary school years and the early secondary years, children are not monitored and evaluated while at school. All children are moved up the grades at the end of each academic year.

The other issue that needs to be addressed at a policy level, is the urgency to transform children into students. There are several kinds of children with different learning interests and attitudes. The mainstream

schooling system does not do justice to them. On the flip side, how long can they be kept away from the mainstream since ultimately they have to be integrated into mainstream society?

The system emphasises that children should not fail and hence when our children are at school, they move from one grade to another but it is very difficult to understand whether the child is actually learning and progressing or just moving ahead as a formality. The problem blows up in our faces. If the child does not know the basics, then what is the point of going to school? Our goal for education then is not being met. THERE IS MORE TRANSPARENCY NEEDED IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM. THIS IS EVEN MORE CRITICAL IN CASE OF CHILDREN WHO ARE LIVING AT THE SBT CENTERS since after 18, by law, these students have to leave the centre and live life on their own without any family support. Every child wants to learn and move ahead. No child believes I am worthless and should not put in any effort towards learning. It is upon the adult in the system to find out if the child is not learning, what is the reason for it and how we can help the child. Sometimes they are not able to express what they feel and that is something we need to unfurl with our efforts. Har bachha kabil banana chahta hai aur woh nahin ban paa raha toh yeh humari zimmedari hai ki hum pata karein ki woh kyon nahin kar paa raha" (Counseling psychologist - SBT)

Sometimes in government schools, there are 300 students in one class. The teachers may not be updated and educated. They just do the same thing they were doing 20 years back. The monitoring and evaluation system is very poor. Children pass even if they did not study and many of them cheat. There is no incentive to study hard or do better. They reach 10th grade and are not able to read a simple line of Hindi. What use is this education? For 10 years from 9 to 5, they go to school. (Yuwa)

How does one balance the needs of these children? How do we treat a 10-year-old who

can think and do a whole lot of things but is at a preschool level of literacy and numeracy? We live in a society where literacy is more important and hence makes such people feel like outliers. All communication is text driven and we have to make sure that happens, yet we should have avenues where they should be engaged in skill building where they feel they are doing well. Every child has that one ability-they could be passionate about Baking or electrical work or carpentry and it doesn't matter whether it is a boy or a girl. They could use their strengths as a stepping stone to their need for literacy and numeracy. For instance, a person interested in baking needs to measure I know how many cups of water or how many eggs going into a recipe. **Using the known and familiar to ladder up to the unknown and unfamiliar and skilling as a pathway to nurture self-esteem.** For that, we need tools, resources, space, a workshop, and competent people. Education needs to be resourceful and we are highly under-resourced. There are so many policies - but those are not intended since they have not been budgeted for, made provisions for or thought through the implementation. So what use is the policy which cannot be implemented? If school infrastructure is created, does it also mean creating a transport system which will drop off and pick up children from school since they cannot be expected to walk 5 km to school and do not have parents to pick and drop them up? **Several miles before the last mile have not been thought of.** (Gubbachi Learning Community)

On a positive note, the time spent at school creates a sense of belonging and much-needed exposure to the outside world.

Once children get over the initial hiccups they start to feel a sense of connection with the physical space and their friends at school.

It is one of the few things they can call their own.

Though most of the shelter homes offer an empathetic environment to a child, one cannot deny that the shelter homes are bubble-like spaces in which children live till they are 18 years old.

The schools outside the shelter-comes give the children a sense of the realities of the outside world, the range of people, judgements and challenges they would encounter.

The act of 'going out' every day also mitigates the feeling of confinement that some of them feel very strongly.

Some of these children do go to regular schools that have provision for special needs. Children feel very motivated when they go to a new environment away from SBT. They also feel a sense of belonging and enthusiasm - main bhi abhi apne school ja rahaoon. It also exposes them to the outside world and learn to cope with it. (Special educator - SBT)

Sometimes we can integrate them into the mainstream schools. Children feel very good that they have been able to go to school like others. They start to identify with the class and the school. Yeh meri class hai, mera school hai. That itself becomes a motivation. Otherwise, they feel they are at home all the time. Going to another environment makes them excited. On the flip side, they also get bullied. People point out and make comments about their physical condition. But for some children it also helps them cope with the real world - they say - yeh to hai, par theek hai. (Special educator - SBT)

Part 2
Thinking Possibilities

Developing Their Moral Compass.

Stories and theatre can create a safe space to share.

Acknowledging their frustrations and feelings

Acknowledging small wins

Being calm, clear and firm about consequences

Developing Their Moral Compass

Stories and theatre can create a safe space to express

We can talk to rescued children about ethics all we want but these children have experienced situations where the family could be abusive, and a father could be an alcoholic. How does one deal with that? **If the child witnesses physical and verbal abuse - s/he imbibes that abuse is the gateway to power.** Another child could react by completely shutting down due to fear and not even articulating what is rightfully hers. Yet another child could imbibe that the strong one intimidates the weak one and s/he could in turn go and try that on a weak child.

If an innocent child has been beaten by another, what is the right thing to tell them? Do we say that hitting is not good or that you should also hit back in self-defence? Children can get confused or may not voice their opinion if they have a different opinion or they may tacitly accept these ideas but not be able to apply them. Indirect approaches help in such situations so that the child understands the complexity of these issues. Also, an open approach is necessary such that the child not only hears what s/he has been told but also puts forth and expresses how s/he feels about an issue.

Some organisations working with rescued children have observed that moralising or lecturing the children often backfires. Children turn a deaf ear or, worse still, can get aggressive with other adults and children in the environment. Nevertheless, this area cannot be left unaddressed.

What works, they feel, is any medium through which children can be **'encouraged to arrive at their own decisions about these issues by developing critical thinking'. These lessons discovered by the children themselves last longer.**

Stories and theatre are some ways of enabling this.

Both these vehicles help the child see the situation in the third person and hence it becomes a non-judgemental space for the child to express her opinion about a situation. Stories narrated or enacted through theatre can also act as springboards for children to narrate their first-hand experiences and project into the future what continuing these unresourceful habits could lead to.

Some of the alumni we spoke to who spent their childhood in shelter homes, and experts who have created curricula based on theatre, spoke about very specific skills that theatre as a medium offers that are immensely valuable in developing perspectives based on 'what-if' scenarios — a technique used in Forum theatre.

Creating empathy in a child or the consequences of their action - it is very effective to tell these things via stories. Premchand and Gulzar have written a lot of stories for children. There is a story called Budhi Kaki - children can relate to the character of the old aunty and their emotions get latched on to the character. Once that happens - they can understand the effect of right v/s wrong actions on that character. There was another story about someone who was travelling to his daughter's wedding and he was very happy. Children start empathising with him. Then on the way, his things are stolen and he is also assaulted. That made students understand the consequences of negative actions. These stories become good starting points for discussions. (Counselling psychologist - SBT)

We often use a storytelling technique - where the teacher starts with a sentence and then the child has to add to it. **This also would prompt the child to think for themselves - on how to problem solve, and how to represent their thoughts. They can realise cause and effect on their own. (NFE Educator - SBT)**

My theatre training has helped me so much in life. When I do theatre - I am reflective and during months when I do not do theatre training, I find myself reactive. I can appreciate different points of view and have better listening skills as a result of the training. It helps in building teamwork and understanding. I am sure other children will also benefit from this. I see the transformation of children who are trained in theatre — they take more initiative, appear confident, and bring ideas to the table. There is a big difference between their baseline and how they are when they finish the training. (SBT Alumni)

> The way forum theatre works is that we ask people to come up with a story with a tragic ending. We do not give them the story, just the social situation that needs to be enacted - a road accident or domestic violence.

Children and adults will project their own experiences or something that they have seen in the news which affected them, where they felt helpless. Since it is unscripted, they make their own script. That's where you really see everything that they've heard come into play. They act out the tragic end and someone dies. That is where a typical play would end. With forum theatre, we would follow it up with the group discussion and ask — who liked the tragic end? No one likes it and the children want to change it. We tell them — you cannot just change the end, you have to go back and act and do things differently. You can't say what needs to change so there is no preaching. They can introduce new characters and new situations and enact them. This can go on for 3 - 4 rounds. When they act it out, the end is tragic each time. Because the stark reality is no matter what you do, things don't change easily. And they keep doing it till they see a small win at the end. It's a very small way of saying that if anything has to change, firstly, it's not going to be easy. But the small win at the end feels real and earned and feels like a group victory. It may take 4-5 hours sometimes to reach that point. It's also cathartic and strange things can happen in the middle. They also realise we are as much part of this society. Things don't change magically in a forum theatre. When you watch the play from the outside the experience is very different from if you experience it from the inside. When we are outside, we feel X person will shout at Y person and everything will be ok. When one enters the play and starts acting out that scene, one realises that bringing about change in another is very difficult. So in our program, we repeatedly reiterate that it is very difficult for you to survive in the outside world. You will still need to pick and choose your battles, because you will want to fight all the battles, and the more you try to fight the harder they will get. Once you ignite a critical consciousness and curiosity in a person. They can just go out and do their own thing. (MukkaMaar)

Forum theatre begins with a short performance, either rehearsed or improvised, which contains demonstrations of social or political problems. Forum Theatre, one of the major techniques within Theatre of the Oppressed, allows spectators to collaborate in the experience by becoming 'spect-actors' (the audiences who participate in the actual performance). Through a moderator (Joker) and a group of actively engaged spectators, Forum Theatre embodies dialogues, exchanges, learning, teaching, and pleasure. At the conclusion, the play will begin again with the audience being able to replace or add to the characters on stage to present their interventions; and alternate solutions to the problems faced.[4]

Developing Their Moral Compass

Acknowledging small wins

> *Each one of us is a story packed with experiences. These experiences create themes over time and eventually culminate into patterns - patterns of thinking and reacting. Despite what we would all like to believe about our rational adult selves - most of us without realising are emotionally dictated by patterns. This influences everything from how we handle failure or grief and how we handle traumatic difficult situations. These patterns originate and get embossed on our psyche from the shortest yet most critical period of our life - our childhood. Everything emerges from here - how we learn, how we learn to not learn, what we learn about envy, anger and pleasing people, learn about trust, abandonment, and betrayal. Children barely listen to the words that adults tell them. They absorb at a very deep level how the adults embody the answers to some of the most complex questions. Shefali Tsabary, Ph.D.*

If we think about this in context to the interactions between the adults and the children at shelter homes or any adult-child interaction, we will find that the adult in the environment plays out subconscious programs in his/her mind and so does the child.

The challenge, but also a dire need, is to break away from regurgitating

patterns of the past. Sometimes adults are spontaneously able to step out of their hard-wired thinking patterns and think beyond a child's inability to do something. However, for the momentum of change to sustain itself, the adult needs to be consistently and consciously aware of one's own biases.

We used to have a child who was not very motivated and she used to fail all her exams. But now we see a turnaround. We don't know what caused the turnaround but we spoke to her teacher at school and asked them also to encourage this child. **The teacher praised her for her small achievements and also entrusted her with small responsibilities that created a positive momentum. We also started to do the same at the centre.** I gave her a small task to do and praised her effort. Today, as a result, she does not get very good marks but she does not fail either. She passes all her subjects. Children get motivated by the smallest things. Even if we praise them for getting one or two marks more, they feel so good about themselves. However, this is not a formula that we can apply to all children blindly. Every child is different and what works for one child may not work for the other. Sometimes children also learn from their failures and shortcomings. Finding out what motivates each child is a separate task in itself. When we highlight their achievements amongst other children in the centre, that also motivates them a lot. (Special educator)

The small wins could be around grooming. Here is how you looked before and now - in terms of appearance and confidence. Grooming is an important step to confidence and social interaction. Define very short-term milestones and the stories can amplify the small wins. XYZ child started to take care of their nails and their hair for instance. What are the 5 things you want to learn how to write would be a small milestone rather than saying, let me show you how to write ABCD. (Sol's Arc)

We can praise their small achievements and that naturally builds their motivation and

confidence. Otherwise - children who live in families are motivated to do well for their family. Sometimes we highlight their achievements in the centre to other children. At times when there are workshops or sessions for special needs children outside SBT, our children are sent there too. They were sent for dance and also for drawing sessions where there were outside mentors. They felt good that outsiders also appreciated them and there was an opportunity to showcase their work. (Special educator SBT)

At TARA, we emphasise the importance of seeing the bigger picture. While supporting children going through tough phases, it's crucial to recognise and celebrate the progress of others who are thriving.This balance keeps the team motivated and reinforces the positive impact of our work.(TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

Developing Their Moral Compass

Acknowledging fears, frustrations and feelings

Some situations are beyond anyone's control - the feeling of being physically confined to the shelter homes could make children anxious or frustrated. However, the laws governing their movement in and out of the shelter homes are for reasons of safety. While this is a reality that cannot be wished away, experts suggest addressing this openly with children by acknowledging their feelings. They also suggest working with children to overcome their body consciousness which could happen in a range of different ways - from martial arts to movement therapy or any kind of indoor activity designed for releasing outdoor energy.

Also, some experts with experience working with children from abusive backgrounds pointed out, that in such situations, there is a natural human tendency on the part of the adults in the environment to sympathise with these children. It is not easy for them to always look at themselves as people who have more and these children as those who have less. Constantly being in that position can be exhausting for them. And the adults in such an environment may hit a roadblock about what to do or give to such a child. So there is an exhaustion that can set in because, in this context, from their lens, they are in a position of power or, at least, privilege. They need a high degree of self-work to be able to shake

off this feeling. There is an assumption that the child is the 'victim' here. However if one looks at this from the child's point of view, there could also be that possibility where the child feels the adult is the victim who has to deal with so many problematic children for years to come while his days in the centre are numbered.

Nobody can change this reality but it would be pragmatic to acknowledge this honestly to the child and partner with the child in figuring out what is the best that can be done together. Children who are not used to sympathy from others also tend to receive it with suspicion or reject it completely. It conflicts with their own understanding of their capabilities and creates dissonance.

On the other hand, an empathetic environment looks at the child holistically, with limitations and capabilities, and offers them the opportunity to build on their strengths.

> *I think sometimes there is also a tendency to infantilise children and keep them very, very safeguarded from the harsh truths of life though what we often forget is that they have seen and experienced the harsh truths firsthand. What we do understand as adults is that the system and society are flawed in the sense that they shouldn't have been there in the first place. And to really acknowledge that, and as a society sort of apologise to these children, and say that, you know, we are party to the society that has created this system in which people like you have to land up here and not to say that this is a happy thing. Sometimes it is important to really just call out the injustice and say that it's unfortunate and nobody enjoys being away from family, right? And we are only trying to do*

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the best we can. So we are not here to rehabilitate you, we are here to work with children like you to figure out how we can change the world so that fewer of you can land here and that's what we do. Which is what Salaam Baalak Trust also does. It is an intergenerational change. I think theatre as a component would be supremely beneficial for them to express what they think of things in general. (MukkaMaar)

There are times when visitors treat them with sympathy. I think that is also not uplifting.. What is needed is to tell them, it is ok, you had a past but now you can do better. A lot of children are stigmatised by their background. They need to feel confident about their background since they did not create it and other children have also been victimised and are dealing with similar circumstances. They would get so demoralised due to what had happened to them that they would not have the motivation to learn. "Ab English padhke bhi kya ho jayega". They feel a sense of guilt and shame about their background. They are also reminded about all this since there are same-age children in the centre who know each other's backgrounds and do feel triggered by each other's comments. Then other children also hear these things and that becomes a matter of bigger shame for the child who is trying to keep things under wraps. Children come to the centre at a young age and they are not discerning at that age and they openly talk about their past and background without realising it could be used against them by other children. (SBT Alumni)

Addressing the feeling of 'being jailed' is important especially since there is little that can be done about the physical infrastructure. (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

Some children who have been through difficult situations at home, still yearn to go home and we must recognise that it is the nurturing that they miss. It could be a situation of one parent being abusive but the other parent loving. For children who go through trauma, it is not just trauma but also the grief of being away from their parents. They miss the small valuable moments of nurturing. (Akanksha Foundation)

The children also go through a lot of shame and guilt and feel they could have done something wrong and start blaming themselves. Hence there is a need to work on these aspects as well, since positive development starts only when shame and guilt leave the individual. (Ayur Gyan Nyaas)

Children imbibe a lot from the way adults behave around them i.e. not just the way adults behave with children but also how adults behave with each other. If a government official comes and scolds a teacher in front of the child, the child learns power dynamics. We cannot influence each of these interactions, especially when it comes to stakeholders who come from outside, and authority figures. We can only influence what is in our locus of control. It can range from implementing a practice to advocating for one or perhaps sensitising children to what is not resourceful behaviour. (Shiksharth)

55

Developing Their Moral Compass

Being calm, clear and firm about consequences

A young and rather boastful champion challenged a Zen master who was renowned for his skill as an archer. The young man demonstrated remarkable technical proficiency when he hit a distant bull's eye on his first try, and then split that arrow with his second shot. "There," he said to the old man, "see if you can match that!" Undisturbed, the master did not draw his bow, but instead motioned the young archer to follow him up the mountain. Curious about the old man's intentions, the champion followed him high into the mountain until they reached a deep chasm spanned by a rather flimsy and shaky log. Calmly stepping out onto the middle of the unsteady, and certainly perilous, bridge the old master picked a far away tree as a target, drew his bow, and fired a clean, direct hit. "Now it is your turn" he said as he gracefully stepped back onto the safe ground. Staring with terror into the seemingly bottomless and beckoning abyss, the young man could not force himself to step out onto the log, still less shoot at a target. "You have much skill with your bow," the master said, sensing his challenger's predicament, "but you have little skill with the mind that lets loose the shot". A Zen Story

Children in shelter homes are like the champion mentioned in the Zen story. They will try everything to challenge the adults. When they throw a tantrum or ask adults to get out of their way, they are testing them— See if you can match that— not to prove the adults wrong, but to prove themselves right!

Children today need a leader just like the Zen master. Educational leaders are meant to be bosses without compromising on kindness, assertiveness and acceptance. It's a skill that is acquired, practised, and learnt.

The tightrope walk of being the BOSS, without being BOSSY

This is what a shelter home alumna observed as a difference between the two shelter homes where she spent her first 18 years. At one, she experienced the staff being sympathetic, which the children clearly took advantage of. At the other shelter home in which she stayed, she experienced the staff being clear and consistent about setting expectations with children on what is acceptable. Yet, she never felt their decisions were forced. On the contrary, it helped her channel her energy.

Boundaries should be made very clear. Students should be told that they have the space and freedom to grow but abusive or foul language would not be tolerated. It has to be self-regulated. Encourage them to think about the differences themselves of what consequences good actions lead to and what consequences unresourceful actions lead to.

There was a child who was very fidgety during math class. The teacher asked him if he needed anything and he said no. At the end of the class, the teacher spoke to him about what happened. That the child missed out on the learning. The learning has to be done but it is your choice when you would like to do it. The teacher is not letting the child get away, showing him he has a responsibility towards it and yet giving him the choice about when he would do it. The teacher heard that he was distracted because of some issue at home but did not delve into discussing it too much. That also subliminally sends a message to a child that a job that has to be done. **It is important to acknowledge the child could be anxious, but at the same time make him realise the situation he faced cannot become the only event while everything else fades in the background**. (Sol's Arc)

During adolescence, children are always trying to push boundaries and that is the reason why conversations are required. Conversations around boundaries. Spelling out what cannot be done - since it would harm someone or themselves, detrimental to wellness. Actions need to be spelt out clearly that wrong actions lead children into remand homes. There are situations when the school and management have taken action and that has helped the child become more ready to learn. (Gubbachi Learning Community)

We have a disciplinary system and if you do We believe a disciplinary system must be clear, consistent, and enforced to be effective. Without enforcement, it becomes counterproductive, as children may begin to feel that the rules don't apply to them, leading to a breakdown in accountability. This is why it's crucial to discuss the rules openly and agree on the consequences for breaking them. Once established, the system must be implemented consistently by everyone involved.

When staff fail to uphold the agreed rules, it sends mixed messages, making the environment unpredictable and diminishing the system's credibility. Children are unlikely to take the rules seriously if they see that the adults themselves don't adhere to or enforce them. A shared disciplinary system ensures fairness, as it's based on mutual understanding and applies to everyone living under the same roof. This creates a stable, respectful environment where boundaries are clear and everyone can thrive. (TARA-Child Protection and Empowerment)

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Getting to the bottom of the problem

Understanding what works for the child

Tools and content to understand mental health

Exposure to new methods and ideas

Poetry and performing arts

Success stories from others

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Getting to the bottom of the problem.

This is seldom a one-step process. counsellors and special educators at some shelter homes mentioned that, at times, it took them several trials of different approaches to break the impasse with the child.

While mental health counsellors and special educators are pre-conditioned due to their training to gear themselves for the long and ambiguous journey, not all staff members are always prepared for it.

Knowing that transformation is a long haul and there will be regressions during the journey can help an adult dealing with these children feel mentally prepared without taking it personally or feeling frustrated. A challenging situation is a time to pause, reflect and re-strategise. It is to be treated as a semi-colon rather than a full stop.

While individualised strategies give the best results in dealing with children, one has to be cognisant of the fact that individualisation is not always possible given the constraint on time and resources. What might help is observing common patterns of behaviour among children and strategising based on a common set of behavioural patterns. Instead of reinventing the wheel each time, or listing down each time a staff member applied a new strategy that worked, this would be part of a ready reckoner that all staff have access to.

At times it is difficult to side-step the child's objectionable behaviour to get to what is behind it but, in instances where experts have been able to do that, it has almost always given them access to the child's thinking and a window into initiating change.

Very few children are persistent about problem-solving and when they are, it has reduced the time wasted in trial-and-error.

> We had an instance when a child was using abusive language and the teacher was disciplining him. This worsened the child's behaviour. We observed this and intervened. Sometimes it is important to let go of our role, power and authority. I drew three columns on the blackboard ; abusive words I know; where I have learnt those; which ones I would not like if someone used on me, and I wrote down examples for each. This encouraged the children to share. During the discussion we learnt that they have learnt abusive words from their peers and sometimes even their teachers. When they wrote down the words they do not like to be told, it helped them reflect and think about not using this on others too. It is important to help children discover this for themselves instead of preaching or moralising. (Dream a Dream)

" When the child does not know something but can get past that barrier and learn it, that leads to a certain confidence. Maine seekh liya, mujhe aa gaya hai, and that creates a spiral of motivation. At times we find children have ran away from homes due to this very reason. Mujhe aa hi nahin raha, aur main kaise padhoon aur parents aur teacher daant rahe hain. There could be a learning disability that could have gone undiagnosed. People just say, "yeh buddhu hai, isko kuch nahin aata." What works is to build from the known and familiar to the unknown and unfamiliar — in every situation— kya aata hai aur kya seekna hai. A child may know from 1-10 but there are numbers beyond 10. Children often tend to stay within their comfort zone. They will keep showing the same thing to staff. When things get complex, their motivation breaks down. (NFE Educator - SBT)

I would make sure, whatever was important to me, was heard by someone — the coordinator or another adult. It often happens that since they have 50-60 children to manage they forget but I would go and remind them. I would not feel disgruntled. I would keep telling them, please yeh kardo…please yeh kardo…please yeh kardo. With this repeated pestering, the staff also register that this child is generally interested in things and hence when a new opportunity arises, they immediately think of us since we are on their radar. I have seen this even when children had a problem with academics and if they did not know who to ask for help- the children would come to me specifically since they knew like I get things done for myself, I would also get things done for them. (SBT Alumni)

A recent assessment of Tara highlighted that new staff often felt overwhelmed due to the extensive systems in place. To address this, an induction program was introduced, ensuring new employees receive structured support during their first six months. This includes one or two training sessions per week, helping them adapt gradually.

Building on this, a comprehensive training program for all staff was implemented, comprising 19 modules covering diverse topics such as first aid, child protection, work organisation, and parenting techniques.

The curriculum is continuously updated to meet emerging needs, fostering confidence and consistency within the team. This shared framework helps align staff on expectations for both children's development and professional conduct.

Tara has also extended its training expertise to other organisations within the ecosystem. Regular team discussions every two months allow staff to address challenges collaboratively. Additionally, an annual meeting focuses exclusively on each child, reviewing academics, family relationships, and personal growth to refine approaches and strategies.

Staff well-being is prioritised through exclusive training on emotional balance at work and access to an in-house counsellor supervised by a psychiatrist, ensuring a supportive and healthy work environment. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Understanding what works for the child

Having identified a problem, there are several paths to the solution. Reaching the child through the medium that connects with them often lowers the resistance.

The point of connection could come from building on their strengths. After years of people telling them there is something wrong with them when an adult places faith in them, and they can learn/do something as a result, that helps them tremendously. If we can identify their interests or strengths, and divert their attention towards their strengths, rather than pointing to their weaknesses that helps keep them motivated.

Another dimension to connect is understanding their context; their background, the language they are comfortable with, and curating content (stories) relevant to this reality.

Understanding the temperament and the driving force for each child takes time. This can be particularly useful in the later years when the staff have to work with the child in identifying their career path. A shelter home alumnus we spoke to felt strongly about giving due care and attention to this process and expressed concern about vocational training suggestions or career counselling done in a hurry, which could set the child up for disappointment and frustration. However on the upside, once a direction has been identified, it is possible to offer children the best possible resources for training to be able to further their interest.

> During our childhood, we went through a lot of negative experiences but, if I look back, the positive experiences overshadowed the negative experiences. At a conceptual level, we are trying to ensure that when the children of this generation at our school look back at their childhood — what are the positive experiences we can give them that they would feel good about? There are three questions that every individual is trying to answer for themselves, including children. The questions are - am I loved, am I safe, am I learning? Learning can be interpreted as growth which is important to human beings only since animals largely focus on safety. These 3 questions have been further fleshed out in the context of children from conflict areas. "Am I loved?" connects to beliefs and identity and social relationships. "Am I safe?" translates to basic needs, and "Am I learning?" is about developing skills and competencies. There are 8 parameters, and it is a holistic way of supporting the child. Of these eight parameters, we plan on what we can impact. But in our impact reports we often always stated that all the 8 parameters are required for a holistic development of the child and we have been able to impact only two or three. I think honest

communication and assessment are crucial to the holistic development of the child. Everybody has their interpretation of these parameters since there is no universal template, though I feel the 3 questions are fundamental to the experience of every child. We know we cannot do everything. For instance on SEL, we have identified a partner organisation. This approach also helps us think through what kind of an ecosystem to build around our school and who the partnering organisations should be. Usually, collaborations are not thought of functionally, but financially. People usually collaborate with organisations operating at a certain scale. Unfortunately most collectives today are based on budget and scale. **It is like a G20 club. With a lot of heavyweights collaborating, the kind of impact numbers one can show is manifold**. Despite showing the impact numbers, every year we have new organisations with new interventions and programs - which signifies that the impact numbers do not reveal the full story.

We have the child at the centre of everything. It is easier said than done. We try to keep in mind whenever we are embarking on something new — what will the child be doing after this program is done? That imagination should be clear in my head. I have not seen much evidence of this in the sector. Very often we stop at training the teacher but do not think about how it will manifest in the child's life. (Shiksharth)

Contextualising learning — getting to know the child and what their life was like back home, who were their friends, what were their names, what was the first sound, and what was the last sound in their name. Pick up stories that are relevant to their contexts. For that one would have to be aware of what their context was. That does not mean the content has to be narrow but building or connecting to what they know. For instance, a tart can be explained as a mithai and that can become a window to discussing differences and diversity. (Gubbachi Learning Community)

We had a child who came to SBT via ChildLine. His parents were separated and neither was willing to take custody of him. When we came to the centre, he had a lot of aggression. He would not listen to anyone. We tried to involve him in things and build a foundation for

learning. He was good at studies and hence picked up fast and we could enrol him in a regular school. But his past trauma was not resolved and he fell again into the trap of substance abuse. He had to undergo psychiatric consultation and was on medication but he was very aggressive. He would either hurt himself or others. We also started therapy sessions with him. He would not listen to anything we had to say. He was disengaged from therapy too. We changed our approach. Since he was interested in reading and reasonably good with English, I offered him a book and asked him if he would like to read it. It was a simple pocketbook for teenagers — Dealing with Depression. He could relate to it so much that he started to take an interest in the therapy sessions. He then started to take an interest in theatre and we got him enrolled in a theatre program and did a course in filmmaking.

Another child was Autistic and had ADHD symptoms. We did not get any feedback from the school about his learning gaps and hence we assumed things were on track. He also was hyper-interested in cricket and cricketers and was informed about so many cricketers and their performances. **We assumed like he has memorised those he would also be able to memorise learning.** The issue was flagged off to us by the school only when he was in the 10th. We were completely taken by surprise. Since he had so much energy, we enrolled him in kickboxing and even with that he was doing exceedingly well. He had won medals at competitions. **It is only in the 10th, teachers told us, he is not able to write at all. Finally, we decided to send him for an assessment. From the assessment, we found out that he has a learning disability and hence using that verdict, he was able to use a scribe at the 10th standard board exams. My learning from this experience was that if the system adopts a collaborative approach towards children and their progress, then every child can overcome their limitations.** (Counselling psychologist - SBT)

Sometimes children come and tell me, "Ma'am you are so good, you explain things so patiently, mujhe samajh aata hai." When they can understand, they actually feel interested. When I find they are losing interest, I change my way of teaching. MUJHE SAMAJH AA RAHA HAI - IS AN EMPOWERING FEELING

AFTER YEARS OF BEING MADE TO BELIEVE THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THEM. They like discussion-based activities since that gives them a chance to think, and express their ideas, and also helps them with their social skills. We give them topics to discuss - what will you do when you grow up? (Special Educator - SBT)

At SBT, we get a lot of exposure. They take care of children and give a lot of attention to children even concerning their mental health. I never thought it would be like this when I first entered SBT - since I was so used to the open space of the other NGO. Here at SBT, it was just a building and I thought to myself "main yahan kaise rahoongi". But it is a good place to learn. **Here no matter what the child's interest - SBT makes opportunities available.** At the earlier NGO, the children were just allowed to go to school and there was nothing else. (SBT Alumni)

We make an individual plan based on the child's needs. We first get their functional concepts clear - like writing their name or awareness of what day or month it is. When these things get clarified then we work on the next step which is towards vocational training. **Even for functional work - sometimes we have to work on the 5 steps that lead to writing which involves fine motor strengthening. Breaking it down is very important for these children** - tearing paper, joining dots and tracing letters or using flash cards to join letters to connect and make a word. We also prepare the TLM that is individualised to a child's needs and strengths. We have a 30-minute individual session with one child and during those sessions, we create one goal and work on it for a few months till the child gets it. Then, if we are still not able to achieve the outcome, we have to course correct. Usually, I find that taking them outdoors always helps break the impasse. For instance, the child who does not understand number counting usually gets it when I ask them to count trees or flowers. **After years of people pointing out to them that there is something wrong with them when an adult places faith in them and they can learn/do something as a result, that helps them tremendously.** (Special Educator - SBT)

63

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Tools and knowledge to understand mental-emotional health

Dealing with the children's emotions emerged as a strong theme among experts working with rescued children. Teachers shared their observation that whenever they try to teach children something and children are happy they are more receptive to learning.

Another mental health expert at SBT made a case for teaching children about their mental health and how their mind works. **Just like children learn about the body and bodily systems so should it** be about their mind.

Organisations like the Akanksha Foundation, Ayur Gyan Nyas, TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment etc. have administered SEL programs (social-emotional learning) at schools or with children and have experienced that empowering the children with tools to empathise with themselves and others and including mindfulness practices as part of their everyday routine has helped the children acquire a shared vocabulary and help each other. The paper-pencil method or teacher at the

helm of the class reminds them of the hierarchy and their place in the hierarchy. Activities, role plays and discussions seem to them like participatory involvement.

Experts also talk about the facilitator's role as being critical in making this work. **Making an honest connection with the child is paramount. Children can sense when the adults tell them to do as they say and not do as they do.** At Ayur Gyan Nyas, the facilitators are encouraged not to impose their own ideas or tell children what to think. Instead they are guided to help children develop their own thinking skills.

The connection between the adult and the child or, for that matter, any two individuals is authentic when not only the child but also the facilitators make mental work part of their routine, and are empowered with the tools to empathise with themselves. At a societal level, we are problem-focused. If we deal with children with this mindset they will also be problem-focussed.

Teachers need to have access to safe spaces in the institution to express their feelings. Children who come from distressed backgrounds are unable to manage their social relationships. They can also indulge in risky and violent behaviour. With this kind of behaviour, the teacher's wellbeing also gets affected.

Some mental health experts working with rescued children pointed out that the children should also be taught about mental health, which will help them to gain insights into their own

needs and struggles. Additionally, these experts feel that the focus needs to shift towards the children's experiences rather than their behaviour leading to a more empathetic approach.

I feel like children at school learn about ethics and morals, they should also learn about mental health. They should be made aware of what the struggles are with respect to mental health and problems that could arise - just like we do that with the body - that vitamin deficiencies could have XYZ consequences - similarly what are the problems that affect the mind? This would help children emotionally regulate - they would be able to gain insights into their own needs and struggles. Also, there should be a common understanding of all these issues amongst all members of the ecosystem. "We often see people in terms of their behaviour, not in terms of their experiences." We need to shift our focus towards their experiences and that would make us more empathetic and also help children in their journey of transformation. **Other support staff other than mental health professionals are not attuned to this kind of information hence we focus on behaviour. (**Counselling psychologist - SBT)

We got the feedback that students are not just comfortable understanding emotions but also expressing emotions. They have developed emotional vocabulary. They have been able to safely express themselves to their caregivers and that strengthens their bond. Children enjoy the session since no teacher is standing ahead and talking to them using a blackboard about what an emotion is. We showed them clips of the movie inside out and asked them to identify emotions, do art-based activities like colouring emojis, and get them to do role-plays by playing emotional charades where a child has to pick up an emotion and enact it. "Bachhe bore nahin ho rahe class mein" is the feedback that we have received. The children are divided into groups and they take turns. This way peer learning happens and they also learn patience by waiting for their turn. These experiences are learning opportunities. **The virtues that they are trying to later ladder up to, the groundwork for that starts to happen in the early stages.** We have also developed some

videos that address the problems that teenagers grapple with so that they can watch those - and later have discussions with us. (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

Earlier we used to train the teachers and expect them to take the learnings to the students but we found that approach was not working because they would hardly remember any concepts at the end of four or five months of training. Then we had to course correct and now we tell them to experience the learning first and then they share their experience with the students and inspire them to learn. We told them yeh bachhon ke liye nahin hain, yeh aapke liye hai - this will help you develop patience and then you will be in a better position to talk about patience to the child. The teachers also admit that such a curriculum is helping them understand these children better. It is not easy to work with these children which leads to staff attrition. The staff need a lot of patience and compassion to deal with these children. The ones who leave say, "badtameez bachhe hain". Compassion also talks about 'self-compassion.' We talk about self-care. When you feel angry towards the children, how do you take care of yourself? (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

We had a 12 year old girl in the centre who had suicidal thoughts. She had hallucinations that someone was going to injure or harm her. We had to address these situations as in many cases, teacher wellbeing can also be affected.

If teachers do not get a safe space, it might harden their stance — "bachhe toh Aise hi hain". We told our teachers to always spend 5 minutes connecting with the children and their emotions before starting a class. Teachers ask them how they are feeling before starting to teach anything.

Once their feelings are addressed, children are more open to listening. We also told them to conduct a mindfulness exercise at the start. Sometimes people connect mindfulness with Yoga. However, the main goal of mindfulness is to focus on the present so that the children can listen to what the teacher is trying to teach them. These activities have worked well with students who would feel disturbed.
(Dream a Dream)

We have also evolved in the way we have implemented the socio-emotional learning curriculum. **Our 3 tier system takes into account that socio-emotional learning is a developmental need and it is not to be seen as counselling that is given only to children who need help. We also noticed that if the teacher is well-connected with the class, the class dynamic is magical.** Hence we make it a point to discuss with teachers — why and how connection building is necessary. Sometimes teachers find it difficult to do this. They also could be triggered by situations since these are after all life situations. They need to understand what 'self-awareness' means. Simplistically, it could mean I 'like' v/s 'do not like' something. But at a critical insight level, it is a person reflecting on — "what made me choose this as a response to this situation?" **It is like an experiment with your own life. It is an evolving concept or a journey.** That is the reason why, if the teachers do not experience it themselves, they will not be able to take it forward. The training has to be continuous support for them. If there is no continuous support, they might still implement it but the effectiveness might come down. Hence both the WHY, WHAT AND THE HOW are equally important. It requires facilitation skill development since these are very personal topics that they need to discuss with the children. WHY - We ask the teachers about their childhood and recall what were the elements that their teachers brought in or could not bring in that could have helped them. They reflect on those things. **We build on that inspiration that they have the power to create that difference for their children.** We show the teachers inspiring videos on how the teacher became a champion for a set of children and that appeals to the emotions of the teachers. **And we need to keep giving them doses of inspiration since they go through so much in their everyday life that it is not easy for them to sustain this feeling.** (Akanksha Foundation)

Children look forward to the SEE Learning classes since it is directly about their lives. **When the children start using vocabulary that is common - I am bumped out of my zone or I am not in my high zone, it does not just add to a common understanding but also a common culture.** This also helps in getting children to accept their vulnerabilities. It is ok to not be strong all the time. **Sometimes children help each other by saying - why don't you ground yourself. So it is not just the adult helping a child but a community of people who support each other.** Children know their strategies and they can identify when their friends are bumped out and help them. **Children have also started to recognise kindness when that happens and a greater acknowledgement in the system. Earlier people would have taken the small acts of kindness for granted.** The spillover effects of these would also be worth capturing. The settling down of the frenzy in the mind and a positive impact on learning. **We see classes are extremely settled - even when there are no teachers in class. Teachers just enter the class and start teaching. They do not need to make efforts to settle them down. Hence the quality of time and attention given by teachers has improved. Teachers feel more fulfilled and that in turn helps them better connect with children.** Children are on task. We always introduce the topic by telling them what they are learning and why they are learning it. (Akanksha Foundation)

There was another instance when a child behaved rudely to a new teacher. The teacher became very upset and walked out of the class. The classmates went to the staff room along with the child who misbehaved and told the teachers who were trained in SEL about the whole incident. The children collectively took the responsibility to apologise to the teacher who was upset. That was the first case of children taking collective responsibility for a wrong action.

Although the SEL curriculum has only been implemented in year 2022 the kind of energy we have seen is quite positive. There are 3 levels at which the mindfulness curriculum has started to show results - a sense of oneness, sensitivity to others, and self-reflection. (Dream a Dream)

There should be some sort of mental training on how to deal with criticism, and how to develop your personality. (SBT Alumni)

The AGN program works with a child on their feelings such that children can understand and identify feelings. The AGN program has been in use for 2-3 months. The program has

guidelines. On each topic, there are 2 to 3 ways of explaining the same thing, since children do not always understand things the same way. The activity could involve art to help the child express emotions. There is also explicit information on what anger would feel like or what joy would feel like for a child. Initially, the children participated little and over time they started to participate more. We just lead them by starting a discussion and invite responses from them — If a child is happy, how else will they express it? Children also at times facilitate each other. **Because of this approach, we have found that the children who did not talk at all have also started to talk. This helps them share more. This is very critical for children.** They learn to support each other. Before that, they would just tease a child who gets angry. These discussions are held once a week. The activities are really interesting and attract children - drawing emoticons for instance. We were trained and also were given manuals to follow. **As a result of this program as a teacher, I have also become more aware of my own emotions and regulating those emotions so that I could be a better guide to the children.** I have tried meditation and experienced that I can better manage my emotions. I have also noticed that children now may get angry but have reduced their use of

abusive language. They have also started supporting each other. (AGN SEEL Coordinator - SBT)

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Poetry and Performing Arts

A long time ago, memorising poetry was par for the course in school. Communities had poetry recitation contests, and poetry was frequently printed in the newspapers. Memorising poetry is considered less fashionable these days in times where the idea of 'rote-learning' has become everyone's favourite punching bag. But the memorisation of poetry can enrich one's life, expanding one's mind and bringing beauty to even the darkest days. Memorising poetry turns on children' language capability - Mensa For Children

Some teachers working with rescued children have shared that when they have used poetry with students, it has proved to be another medium to inspire children to look beyond their limitations. For instance, Chidiya Ka Sansaar gently nudges children to expand their horizons. The rhythmic nature of poems and slogans have repeat value and that often helps reinforce important messages to children effortlessly.

The organisation MukkaMaar uses a lot of slogans as part of their training for the girls to reinforce important messages and help build inner resilience in the girls.

Fight Fight, Jo Kabhi Na Maane Haar, That's Our Team, We are MukkaMaar!

Another way of looking at poetry is how it allows a child to play with words. Some of the teachers have shared how the use of poetry has not just made learning engaging and light-hearted but also helped children create their own words and phrases.

We also play games, 'Akshaar ki rail'; we had created a song, 'Rail chali rail chali,' and they created words like 'SaRa' and 'PaTa' and then someone combined it to form 'SaraPata' and asked us, "Does this mean anything?" I said, "Yes, it means walking fast." So they extended the song to, "Rail chali rail chali, sarapata sarapata rail chali." (NFE Educator - SBT)

Performing arts give a child a sense of self-worth and when the child feels that - it helps them in many aspects of life. **These approaches can also be integrated with learning since, that way, one would know that the child is thinking, and applying what they have learnt and not just consuming information.** That is working very well and that is our strength. (Trustee SBT)

We have a very serious music, dance and theatre program. Our effort is always about how we can get our children to realise their potential. Through our annual plays and annual dance programs, we help our children find expression along with building their confidence. We give them a sense of empathy, equality and equity irrespective of religion or gender and it is getting more and more difficult to do that. (Trustee SBT)

We give children an opportunity to find out their interests and then **they would have opportunities to perform or showcase what they have learnt and this is really important to these children since it gives them a sense of acceptance that is so lacking in their lives.** (Makkala Jagriti)

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Exposure to new ideas, methods of working

Since shelter home facilitators repeatedly mentioned that discovering what would break the impasse with a child is a process of trial and error, exposing the adults and the children to new thinking, new ideas and approaches have been beneficial in many ways.

Children learn best when they are not conscious of the fact that they are learning. Using new approaches of thinking helps overcome the association that some of these children have with boredom and learning.

Other shelter home staff also mentioned that creating new activities helps them fill gaps where children are not able to experience a real-life situation that facilitators need to expose them to — grocery shopping, for instance. Some organisations like Dream a Dream have created a broad structure for the facilitators after having seen that it works to build a connection. Within this broad framework, facilitators have the choice and flexibility to devise what would be

most suited to children on a particular day. The approach the organisation has taken to identify the people who first underwent the training has also been out-of-the-box, ensuring the effort and time spent on training is well-received. It is an example of creating the 'pull factor' for learning amongst adults.

> There are spaces of empowerment where children are spoken to about health and hygiene —these are things that no one will talk about to children but are essential nonetheless. These are not about curriculum — we look at everything from the lens of student well-being. SEEL is only a part of it — nutrition, fitness, and mental well-being are all a part of it. We have sessions called 'Inspire Me.' Children ask questions to people — "what are the perks of a job like this?" For instance, a child might think — "if I want to become an actor, I do not need to study." But on talking to an actor, they may realise, "I have to learn my lines and read," hence it would still be needed. (Akanksha Foundation)

One of the building blocks of our pedagogy is called the 'arc of transformation' that is divided into 4 parts. The powerful beginning is to ensure a connection at the beginning so that there is no gap in the way the information is conveyed and received. This also ensures engagement. The second stage is the middle stage; discussion-based or storytelling; 'beautiful you' is another activity where they scan their body and identify their strengths; and reflection is the third stage, based on their experience. The fourth stage is closing — what is one word or a metaphor to summarise the whole learning experience? This is the way every classroom period is structured. Teachers have, on their own, taken this format beyond the SEL classroom, to even other classes like when they are teaching math or language. Also they do a check-in and a mindfulness activity at the start. Teachers have experienced a higher level of engagement amongst students after following this approach. We have created a bank of check-in questions that the teacher

could ask or a set of mindfulness activities that the teachers could use. When teachers use this in their math or language class it may not lead to critical insights though it leads to interaction with the teachers. (Dream a Dream)

When we decided to take our curriculum to Jharkhand government schools, we could have asked the government to issue a letter to the school and nominate teachers for training but with that approach we would not have found the right people. Hence, we went to schools and had a small engagement with the teachers and selected the ones who seemed most amenable to work with, and then we trained them. There were 2 teachers from every school. We also gave them a modular curriculum and in each school the teacher had the liberty to devise their lesson plans and choose what was most relevant to be used depending on the needs of the class. There was no assessment linked to any of this. Now this whole approach is being extended to 300-odd schools using the first batch of teachers who were trained and will act as facilitators. They will share their learning and also train the next batch of teachers. This will ensure teacher ownership, which is critical, else this whole curriculum would be nothing but a bunch of papers. From this, we learnt that if teacher wellness is taken care of then the benefits percolate down to the students too. (Dream a Dream)

Teachers are exposed to new thinking by way of workshops and discussions. We learn and then we can make that new thinking available to students. We learnt at one such workshop how to use waste material or children's toys as TLM. Paper that they generally throw away, when they see it being put to use, they get a new perspective. "Oh isko aise bhi use kiya ja sakta hai." (Special educator SBT)

We hired individuals who were passionate about teaching, even though they may not be qualified. We enforced that all students had to speak English else their house points would be deducted and within six months all of them were able to speak English. We tried this buddy system with them where every week they would pair with someone who has different qualities and they share each other's qualities. That worked well. The teachers would initially customise the questions in the assessment and

the session plans to what the student was good at so that the students would feel hooked. Later they gradually moved to more general session plans and lessons so that they get used to life outside YUWA which will not always play up to their strengths. We gave them storybooks to read in English so that it would be fun for them. Some of the famous stories were dramatised and students rehearsed it for six months and then one day everyone sat and watched their drama. (Yuwa)

Typically when children enter, they're not in the mindset of immediately getting into the routine. They would still be wondering why are they here and what is the mistake that they made. The child goes through a series of emotions. **We build rapport with the children initially. We tell them, this is what we offer, would you like to be a part of it? We allow the child to observe the session and not participate. It is completely okay for the child to just come and sit back. We have something called a calm down corner that we have set up in each learning centre.** Some of the children use that space to just emote their anger, frustration or confusion, whatever state they are in. We've just put some art-related items there. There are some soft toys. We tell them they could just stay there for a while and watch the class and join in when comfortable. **That is how the rapport starts and some of them immediately want to speak to the facilitator.** Quite often, with the intent of filling the learning gaps in the child's life, the goal that people set for these children is scholastic excellence. I want the child should be able to stand on their own feet— so they are in a hurry to teach. But I think there are people long enough in the system to see that teaching will happen if the child is ready to learn. There could be a bank of activities that are not always academic — it could be giving a child some batteries and some tyres and auto parts, and in due course of time, the child will create something and in the process, learn about wires— but also about the act of creation and collaboration. A hands-on curriculum could be a good entry point. (Makkala Jagriti)

What Can We Borrow From What Worked, Including the Uniqueness of Programs That Organisations Currently Offer?

Success stories from others and building on strengths

Many shelter homes are often in touch with their alumni to come back to the homes and share inspiring stories with their children. While the formal touch-points are in place, what also helps is the informal touch-points.

When staff members see a child struggling and spontaneously share stories with them of their struggles and what helped them overcome those struggles. **Can teachers be trained to write stories based on new challenges or situations that they face every day with the child?**

Experts suggest whatever is easily available to anyone is undervalued and this is true even for the alumni sessions made available to the children. Instead what they felt would be more valued would be creating a pull factor so that children could get inspired and ask for the alumnus they would like to meet.

No matter how ordinary a person's beginnings, when the person has achieved success they look like an extraordinary person to the child who could be still struggling with their own thoughts. While sharing success stories,

the journey could be made as promising as the destination when the story that is shared is not of someone who is accomplished but of someone who is on their way to making something out of their life, or stories about everyday hurdles that people overcome.

Normalising failure — the ability to bounce back and resilience —is as important as normalising success. During the research, we heard the story of persistence as an example of what worked with a rescued girl who achieved her dream of becoming a fashion designer but that conflicted with her values of sustainable living and hence she had to go back to the drawing board to figure out what she could do. When she switched careers, the shelter home authorities wanted to know why she was not using the training that had been invested in her. She, in turn, found it hard to explain her reasons.

Such stories **can also inspire children, giving them the message that they should follow their heart and not spend their life feeling invested in the wrong decision — whether it is a wrong career or marriage.**

The environment matters as much as the opportunities available to them. Are there stories of young adults in the environment who have succeeded? If they are constantly exposed to these, it would subconsciously inspire them. **The environment itself has to be so powerful that the child realises that another individual came in at a certain point in their life and exited the shelter home to achieve something, and "I too can be one of them".** They are not preached into it and the children are subconsciously imbibing it.

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I feel there should be informal meetings with alumni where children can go out with them and also have casual conversations. If there were posters of alumni and children were asked who would you like to speak with, their interest levels would be completely different. **The fluidity of the conversation is also very important. Is it where someone is standing on a stage and talking or is it a situation where the children get to mingle? Ownership and pull can be cornerstones of everything that has to be planned.** After alumni come and talk about their life journey, students could be asked, "What would you like to do". Students could be told about the probable directions they want to take and space could be given to them to allow them to switch if they do not like something. These children would have to take on adult responsibilities as soon as they move out of the centre and make decisions every step of the way. They would not be able to do that if there was a system making decisions for them. (Sol's Arc)

While stories of success are amplified, what about stories of failure? We can normalise failure for a child instead of making them fearful of it. It will help them understand that they are not going to succeed immediately and have realistic notions of effort. This can also help them build resilience. (Sol's Arc)

There was a child who was physically handicapped — and yet was very energetic and also played football very well. It was a delight to see him. I think his motivation was due to his interest in football. I used his strengths to motivate him. "See you play football so well, like that you will also learn to read one day". He used to feel very motivated when I used to talk to him that way and smile and look happy. Later, he also improved in his academics. (Special educator - SBT)

There is no conversation about 'fundamental rights' in the curriculum. Stories are a good medium that can reach a diverse age of children. Stories that can sensitise them to their rights or towards emotional regulation. **Stories also are received with less resistance since they are in the third person. Story is such a versatile medium that one can write a story about anything. Children also connect very well with stories.** (NFE Educator - SBT)
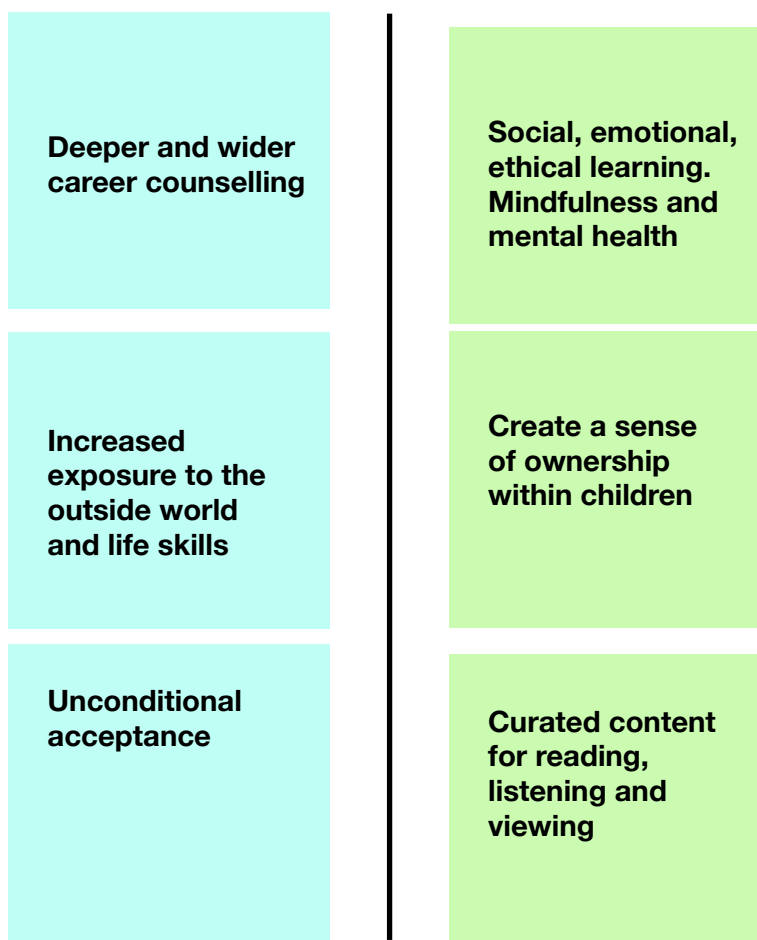
We also try to talk about our problems. **We tell them that even though we stay with family, there are problems. We share our experiences of what we have been through, and how we have survived the challenges.** Similarly, you will also go through ups and downs in your life like everyone else, so do not get bothered by it. (Social Worker - SBT)

We hear from girls - it's like a rat race we don't want to get into that we are very comfortable where we are. Positive mentoring and connecting them with role models have helped a lot. We invite female professionals very often to our program and we just introduce the girls to them and then we leave them to be around them so that they can know each other and then they can see where someone is coming from and how things have changed for them. we try to bring females who have come from similar backgrounds but have developed themselves gradually. They share their struggles which might connect with the girls who might be in similar situations. We have never encountered resistance from the girls to play sports. They wanted to play 6 days a week. (Yuwa)

Emerging Narratives

There is so much out there with respect to curriculum, so many programs created by so many civil society organisations, that we are no longer at a stage where we are deprived of what to offer to children. We now have a problem with abundance. We are grappling with an excess of information and more options than we can handle. Even if one zeroes in on something, the other challenge is to implement any learning curriculum in a real-life situation that is so dynamic and where so much is happening. Nevertheless, there are a few areas where the views of experts converge.

Deeper and wider career counselling	**Social, emotional, ethical learning. Mindfulness and mental health**
Increased exposure to the outside world and life skills	**Create a sense of ownership within children**
Unconditional acceptance	**Curated content for reading, listening and viewing**

Emerging Narratives

Deeper & wider career counselling

The shelter home staff spend time understanding the needs, and interests of children, and try to marry those with career options available. **They have to, for practical reasons, evaluate options that children are interested in while using the lens of employability.**

Some felt that if this process was started earlier, i.e. not when children are close to seventeen to eighteen years, it would be even more beneficial. Children also wanted to know about a wide range of career paths, like social media or becoming a small business entrepreneur. not just the ones that are oft-heard.

Starting the process early would let children explore, let children experience some of these options by actually working in these areas, and also fail if they discover that the option that they dreamed about did not turn out the way it was imagined.

Curricula tend to be very purpose-driven — reading, writing, learning numbers etc. In the school system, we give them knowledge and follow it up with purpose but the first point of receiving that knowledge is still devoid of context. Many children struggle with writing because they see adults around them not writing. They experience the same disconnect with career options or vocational training areas that are suggested to them.

Experts suggest that if the application is given first that creates a hook for learning. There is a lot that children also learn by observing or being an apprentice.

An alumnus we spoke to told us that sometimes children drop out of vocational training because of confusion between paths, or difference between the way a child perceives and imagines how vocational training would be and the way it turns out. Or they might choose a path that the staff feel would not earn them money and are then dissuaded.

Another shelter home alumnus also told us that vocational guidance programs would benefit from a gradual process of understanding the child slowly as many themselves are not aware of what they like.

> Sometimes in a shelter home, the issue of career counselling becomes tricky. We have a child who is very talented and can replicate a drawing in 30 minutes but is not academically inclined. SBT could invest in the child's training but what happens after that? Art is a difficult field and it takes years to establish oneself. If my child is inclined towards art I would still feel that okay go and pursue what you can because you will have a buffer of a few years where I will be able to support you while you stand on your feet. But with children who are in a shelter home that buffer is difficult to provide. This can be a very real constraint. (Executive Council Member SBT)

> I happened to watch a play at SBT and it was the first time I watched a play. Till that time, I used to only watch movies and think everything shown was true. Later I started performing and doing theatre and when it was time to choose a career path, I realised theatre is something I could do. It is tough but something of my interest. I chose the career path organically. (SBT Alumni)

Emerging Narratives

Increased exposure to the outside world and life skills

What is learnt is significantly higher than what is taught. Children learn so much by observing or simply by being present in an environment. What they learn is not necessarily confined to a skill. It could range from developing their social quotient to triggering an aspiration for better living.

Teachers said that everything cannot be planned via an activity. Children learn best when they are not aware of the fact that they are learning. Like just by being in a family and partaking in all that the members of the family do, they learn about values, about concepts of time, money, priorities, roles, responsibility, etc.

The same is not possible at the shelter homes since there are restrictions on what the children can and cannot do. For instance, children cannot enter the kitchen for reasons of safety. However, cooking is a life skill that older children, especially, need to learn.

Some experts suggested that in order to create a sense of purpose in children, while at the same time, learning the skills, the children get involved in projects. For example, a project about healthy eating could range from designing healthy menus to learning about nutrition and creating healthy snacks, etc.

Wider exposure also encompasses exposure to what a 'good life' is even while they are at the shelter homes. Children are encouraged to pursue education and are motivated by being told it would pave the way for a 'better life', although the children often find this very theoretical. Hence it does not make sense to them. Just like children from privileged backgrounds do not understand danger as a real experience but only understand it at a surface level, for these children, a better life is also only a theoretical possibility that they do not fully understand. But if someone leads by example or shows them how it works or creates the environment that is being spoken of then they start to experience the 'better life' and the momentum towards it starts in the present and not in the distant future. This could mean normalising for the children who live in shelter homes - the idea of communicating in English, watching or reading age-appropriate content, eating healthy, taking responsibility of self and surroundings, learning as a way of overcoming the stigma of the past etc. but creating such a culture at the shelter homes.

Some experts felt there was no sense of competition amongst children at the shelter homes, which they would encounter once they stepped outside.

> I've been having meetings with my coordinators and telling them, not just with education, but in general, our children need to develop resilience. We provide everything. Their bed sheets are being washed. These are 16-year-old girls. It happens that many times when they go for higher education, we shift them to a hostel. They would call us and say, I cannot withdraw the money. (Executive Council Member SBT)

> Sometimes we send children (special needs) for workshops and they enjoy it - for instance - interacting with professionals or dance

workshops. When we highlight their achievements amongst other children in the centre - that also motivates them a lot. (Special educator - SBT)

I feel these children start to sense disapproval and then behave aggressively. They are very sensitive to any kind of criticism. Many other children have come from non dysfunctional families which could be poor. They are very different from those children who have come from abusive backgrounds and have been hyper-normalised. They think everything is okay. They don't realise the implications of their actions today are not sustainable for the future. (SBT Alumni)

We need to make learning more experiential — give a child 20 rupees and ask him to buy something and this has to be in every field. It should be treated as a hygiene factor **what are you learning and where will it be used?** Here we are trying to impart life skills to the child and not mere education and sometimes **for the children who live in our shelter homes, the world outside is very different from the values we are trying to teach them.** (Trustee SBT)

Children in childcare institutions need to develop life skills earlier than their peers in family settings, as they often transition into adulthood much sooner. They must be equipped to handle essential tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and understanding basic health needs—knowing how to respond to common issues like headaches, for example. Time management, money management, emotional regulation, and decision-making are also critical. At 19, they will face daily decision-making challenges, whereas in a childcare institution, such opportunities are limited.

At TARA, children take on responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and attending life skill courses. They are also assigned projects, such as planning and managing events like the Diwali party within a set budget.

Additionally, a child representative is elected every six months through a structured campaign process. This representative participates in staff meetings, shares announcements, resolves minor issues, and encourages peers to find solutions independently, fostering leadership and problem-solving skills. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

We have a life skills program at Yuwa which every child has to enrol in. It is divided into segments: health, finance, and leadership skills. These are many other sub-segments; if they learn banking, they learn about saving, how to do online transactions; or with digital literacy, the safe use of social media. How to file a FIR. Yuwa girls are looked up to by everyone in the community, even the men. If there is a notice that someone does not understand, they would come and ask our girls what it means. Our life skills curriculum is upgraded every year so that students don't get bored and also based on their needs. Earlier girls did not have a mobile phone but now they do hence we teach them things like how to use apps — Ola and Uber when they are traveling. Also, the life skills are age-appropriate. For younger girls health could be about healthy eating and for older girls it could be about menstruation. The Yuwa alumni have told us that we are lacking in our digital exposure to children. When they go to university they have to spend 3 - 4 months learning the tools for research. (Yuwa)

Emerging Narratives

Unconditional acceptance

Though there is a lot that is being done at shelter homes concerning the unconditional acceptance of children, all stakeholders feel that there is a lot more that can be done. What people often focus on is the behaviour of the child and confuse it with the identity of the child. "*Yeh to aisa hi hai, inse nahin hoga" (this child always displays a certain behaviour and they won't be able to change it)* is a statement often heard or, at least, felt. There can be work done with the adults in the ecosystem on their beliefs. A lot of times the beliefs and attitudes that adults have about the behaviour of children can push the children further back, unwittingly, despite our best intentions.

Regressions are common with children, and there should be enough space in the system to acknowledge that regressions could happen with adults too. One has to acknowledge to the teachers that it is not always possible to stay calm and stay centred but we have another day to try it out again. If adults in the environment shift from problem-focused to solution-focus that has the power to influence the next generation.

What is the lens through which adults in the environment see 'childhood'? When a social worker articulates it as moulding these children, is it the vision of the adult or the child's own vision

that the children are being moulded

No one who talks down to children is ill-intentioned or due to a lack of love for them. There is only one reason why an adult speaks rudely to a child and that is that the adult herself is hurting and what is more heart-breaking is that they barely know this about themselves. This is because of years of emotional baggage that the adult has experienced get repressed and become a blind spot for the adult. The old wounds do not go away but can get triggered at a moment's notice. Once triggered the adult feels powerless and out of control and to gain control could say something hurtful as a reaction. When adults point to children what is wrong, it comes from a feeling of inadequacy in the adult. When adults find children disrespecting their word and their boundaries, chances are not because they're wild and chaotic, but because we have a problem with leadership, consistency, order, handling conflict and saying no. It is time to change the direction of the spotlight and turn it inward. From the child who needs to be fixed to the adult who needs to evolve. Dr. Shefali Tsabary

into? "*Humara kaam wohi hai joh ek shilpkar ka hai jo pathar ko taraash karke murti banata hai."*

Reframing beliefs and seeing alternative possibilities to the same situation is a slow brewing process.

Drip training might work as opposed to intensive sessions. If there is a coordinator then it is the coordinator's job to oversee what the facilitators are doing and have conversations with

them — "I saw this in the classroom today and it felt more like a push than a pull." The coordinator then retrains the facilitator. Classroom observations are very useful, and the coordinator can follow these up with showing the facilitator alternatives — what they could have done instead of what they did do. It is far more effective to show it than to say it. Children will have less conditioning and fewer years of conditioning, but the adults in the environment have had longer years of conditioning and therefore it gets a little more hardwired. Also, many times, as adults, we judge without realising we are judging.

Another dimension to this issue is the staff-to-student ratio. However, redefining the goals for the staff members can mitigate some of this. Each staff member, if responsible for establishing an emotional connection with a certain number of children, could help create emotional bridges with children instead of the staff and children living siloed lives. Otherwise, feeling isolated and grappling with problems every day, no one is able to connect and find common solutions.

Can theatre become a medium to connect these two worlds? Any training could be, if viewed from a narrow lens, looked at as just learning a skill. But, if the trainer and the student approach it from the point of view of learning life skills, and values that can help build character, then the training can be transformational.

Organisations like Dream a Dream, Butterflies NGO, The Akanksha Foundation, Ayur Gyan Nyas

Foundation etc. have seen the benefits of introducing empathy-based approaches to their staff and students which has helped them identify their needs, address them, and connect with each other from a place of not feeling depleted, reducing judgements and interpersonal conflicts.

We have observed that the teachers who have undergone the empathy training are more observant, as a result, of the children in the class. For instance, if the child is quiet, they know they have to seek the child out or if someone is hyperactive, they dig deeper. **Their communication with children is more positive, they want to know more from the child** and the child feels they have space to speak to the teacher. (Butterflies NGO)

We do encourage our facilitators to practise, yet I would not say with confidence that all the facilitators do practise. Nevertheless, what the child experiences is a community of compassionate individuals. **If a child has to understand self-regulation and if the facilitator with him/her is not self-regulated in a stressful situation how would the child understand?** Once in a way every individual buckles under pressure but not always. Or the teacher could acknowledge to the child that she is not in her most balanced state of mind and needs space. These subtle things also make a huge difference. **If we are teaching children about LIFE, the rules cannot be different whether one is a child or an adult.** We have also seen this pushback with our teachers for anything new that comes along which they feel is beyond what they signed up for and what they sign up for is being a math or science teacher. Sometimes they feel it is helpful and yet they do not want to do all this with the children. Though socio-emotional development has always been part of the Akanksha model, at the time of recruitment interviews we do inform our teachers. (Akanksha Foundation)

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One can only sensitise them. It does not mean we can give them a formula since there is no such formula. **Even after they are sensitised they would be going back to their old behaviours in the heat of the moment. Then the teacher would have to self-reflect and what will help is creating a culture where the teachers can safely talk to each other without feeling judged.** Since a judgement on a teacher is also damaging, it comes as a relief to the teacher when they realise they are not going to be judged. (Sol's Arc)

Whatever they achieve given their capacity— whether it is academics, sports, music or any field that the child is interested in— these children should be accorded the same respect and appreciation that we offer to normal children. We tend to highlight their disabilities and disregard their capabilities. They also don't find acceptance in the outside world, even if it is school. They often hear other children say, "isko rehne do, iske bas ka nahin hai, isse nahin hoga". **With regular children, if they struggle with some task, people motivate them. "Dekho tumhara friend bhi kar raha hai tum bhi karo." But we do not give such allowances to the children with special needs.** If they are accepted, there will be a shift in people's perspective and also their thinking about themselves. If this happens, the feeling will be one of empathy, they will be offered help where they need it, and be appreciated for what they know. They will also not feel that people are being unduly sympathetic towards them. These children are also conscious of the show of unnecessary sympathy towards them. "Jitna main kar sakta hoon utna toh accept kar lo." (Special Educator SBT)

Can theatre become a medium to connect these two worlds? So far theatre has been only thought of as an activity and offered to those who are interested. But if we have to borrow from the values of theatre and apply them to life. I say that to all my children who train under me, don't think of this as just a 3-month workshop. Think of this as a place where you will learn something that will help you for the rest of your life. (SBT Alumni)

Getting our staff to the level where they understand children and are sensitised to children and their needs is what is a challenge, since 15 years ago a lot more was acceptable. **The teachers are adults who were conditioned and were socialised in a different sort of environment. How they can be asked to unlearn and re-learn is what needs to be cracked. That is all they know. They are not doing it out of any sort of viciousness. A lot of times, these unresourceful habits are subliminal. These are dark spots in an individual which they may not even be aware of.** Teacher training is very important. We need to think of each child as an individual and that is something even more important for the street children since we are conditioned to not think of them as individuals but as beggars. (Trustee SBT)

What can we do to open up their mind to other possibilities? To be able to do all the complex things, the teacher needs to be empowered. It is not as simple as walking into class and teaching third grade geography. The teacher is expected to teach a third grader geography, an eight grade student math, and perhaps also help an older student. Then there are complexities that the child faces when they go from shelter homes to private schools where they see the whole atmosphere differently. There are mental health issues that are very often suppressed and emerge later. There is the agony of not being able to spend time with their family or meet their parents, the idea of abandonment. All this impacts their psyche and gets manifested in their behaviour. Can we enhance teacher training such that the teacher becomes the receptacle of knowledge and is equipped to make a judgement about which kid needs what and what is the unit of knowledge that needs to be doled out? They need to be able to assess the children and understand who are the outliers and how does one overcome that. (Trustee SBT)

Children and young adults go through many phases, requiring patience and understanding. Progress is rarely linear, with inevitable ups and downs along the way. It's important to manage expectations, as high or continuous demands can overwhelm them. Often, when a child makes small progress, we tend to rush them into the next step, which can hinder their growth.

Growing up is never easy, and it's even more challenging in a childcare institution. Adolescence is a particularly sensitive time,

marked by physical and emotional changes. Many teenagers also grapple with a deeper understanding of their family situations, which can lead to denial or depression. (TARA - Child Protection and Empowerment)

At our Bangalore centre, we have created a non-threatening and non-judgemental space for children. In the first couple of weeks we see a lot of children not engaging in the activities—which we are okay with. It's finally up to the child to come and say this is what is bothering me. This has made us quite popular in the shelter homes. A year back, at one of the homes, there were some stray violent incidents; someone had to be hospitalised, but even during that time, you know, none of the facilitators were abused by the children. That non-threatening or non-judgmental environment, with the choices you give children, makes a difference. Now this is part of the culture of the organisation and what has worked is we have to experience it ourselves before we can do it for others. So experiential learning of the values that we stand for is something the organisation strongly believes in and keeps investing in also. When we work with external stakeholders on programs, we also extend this thinking. We don't start with the question of what is right v/s wrong. We start with the question — what is our dream for this situation and what can we do to move towards it? Consistency is the key. On some days one

will get a smaller response and on other days the staff might get a better response, but one must keep doing what one has to irrespective of the response. (Makkala Jagriti)

Emerging Narratives

Create a sense of ownership in children for their own learning

There is a sense of entitlement that comes with getting everything without asking. This translates to a general sense of ennui even for learning opportunities. Experts suggest creating a pull when it comes to learning areas. One can't draw a vision for every child and show them *here is where you will be in the next ten years* and the shelter homes are dealing with thousands of children, which makes it even more complex. One factor that will unbundle this challenge is 'the sense of ownership'.

The opposite of entitlement is responsibility. Some alumni felt that older children can make good teachers to younger children since there is a stronger emotional connection. Some experts suggest making the alumni a part of the management and that could become a way of including a stakeholder's voice in the decision-making since children are the best people to think through solutions to their problems.

Manzil is an organisation based in Delhi, that has an after-school program. They have two to three things they provide as standard classes: English, Math, Computers. Other than that, everything depends on what the children want to learn. There is no boundary between who is a student and who is a teacher. They could have an eleven year-old as a teacher and an eighteen year-old as a student. It is a thirty year-old organisation and their method has stood the test of time. They have defined levels. Once you have finished a level, you can graduate as a student to the next level and teach the students in the previous level. That has freed them up. Once the children start teaching, their learning shoots through the roof.

Ownership cannot be established unless there is a sense of rhythm and regularity that the child experiences concerning their learning. A few shelter homes mentioned that the flip side to having access to a plethora of opportunities is that it breaks the rhythm for the children and teachers since just as they have got comfortable with one activity, something new comes along.

There is a fine line between not over pressuring children with competition and ensuring they do not become complacent. It is not that competition is bad, but we need to teach children what is a healthy attitude towards competition.

To inspire ownership, the environment also plays a very important role. Is the environment inspiring? Are there stories of young adults in the environment who have succeeded? Something like this if they constantly look at it, it would subconsciously inspire them and create the much-needed pull. Some teaching staff at shelter homes have tried to instil

ownership towards learning by creating curiosity around topics introduced to the children.

Some children might be natural leaders. They need to be identified and given responsibility. Once, I was able to identify two children at the centre who disrupted the sessions. I gave them the responsibility of managing the computers - creating a roster of children who could use them, making sure that the computers were used responsibly, etc. This made them use their natural leadership qualities which were not being utilised (and hence they disrupted sessions).

Their energy had to be channelled by increasing their engagement; which could be creative engagement, sport-related engagement; giving them responsibility — organising the morning assembly etc. To manage this transition, the adults in the system would have to neutralise their sense of authority and replace power with care and compassion. (Dream a Dream)

Once ownership comes in, then it is not a push, it is a pull. So what can we do to create that sense of ownership? **They need to 'ask' for what they need. It can't be offered on a platter since children will start to devalue it.** What they need and what the caregivers feel they need could be different. At first, the children would just need a safe space. From there they would need a space to learn. But the transition of moving from safe space to space to learn would have to be made by them. If you give it to them, that emanates from your perception of what the person needs. In what direction they move ahead, they would have to take a call on. Of course, the organisation can nudge them towards the next step. (Sol's Arc)

Literacy and Numeracy can also be very milestone-based and very choice and freedom-based. Within literacy and numeracy, what is it that you want to learn? Do you want to be literate? Do you need a bank account? For the bank account, you need to fill in this form. Keep some forms around. Let them come and tell you they do not know how to fill out the form. Let them ask for help rather than offering it to them. Seeing those small successes and small shifts creates a sense of ownership. **Visually I always try to remember 'whose back the monkey is on'? If it is on my back, I would need to solve for it but it is not**

always my responsibility to solve another's problem. They need to equip themselves with problem-solving skills to solve for it. As long as an organisation is going to hold the mantle of making the children's life better it is not going to work. It will have to be their own journey and once a child realises his sense of ownership over his own life, there is no going back. For the adult, small wins come with a sense of relief and that keeps the momentum going. For children, it would have to be structured consequences. For instance, if a child is not doing well in studies, they could be asked whether they would like to put in more hours on their own or want a tutor. (Sol's Arc)

Can we give them skills on how to become a learner? Equip them with the skills such that they take ownership of their learning. I attended a workshop that was about learning styles - auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. If we can apply these concepts to our work we can sensitise children to their learning styles and let them know if they are struggling with the wrong one and also sensitise their facilitators. (Counselling psychologist - SBT)

Whatever is designed has to be practical. It is not education for the sake of education but education to engender the entrepreneurial mindset, engender empathy and equity so that the children are equipped to deal with what life is like outside. It is not about cocooning them. Our children today, in many ways, are entitled since we can give them access that other children may not get. However, we need to now think, when they go into the world outside, beyond the education and employment opportunities, what will be their moral centre? **There is a learner mindset that some children might have and many children might be lacking**. (Trustee SBT)

Emerging Narratives

Social, emotional, and ethical learning. Mindfulness and mental health.

The environment at the shelter home is a bubble. When children move out of shelter homes at 18, they find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the outside world. This may be partially true due to the protective space of the shelter home but also because, at eighteen, the children find themselves thrown into an atypical situation where they have to live on their own without their family.

While at the shelter homes, they are used to courteous behaviour from the staff, when they step outside they have to deal with criticism and curiosity of others about their past.

Learning about their mind, and how to make it work, could become a life skill they acquire. If they are made aware from the very beginning, they will be a little more emotionally regulated and insightful about themselves. They would be able to identify their needs and what they are struggling with.

No one can envision what the future would look like. **What would help the children is for us to help them build the ability to adapt to change. Change is constant.** Children should get used to it. The generation before us has adopted technology. Likewise, children need to have the mindset that they have to learn at every stage of their life. Hence, taking them through scenarios is important.

From that perspective, the lens of well-being is unchanging. No matter what kind of times we live in, well-being will never go out of fashion. We do not know whether math or history will be relevant

tomorrow, but as long **as we are human, our feelings will continue to matter, and navigating emotions will be an important skill at every life stage.**

Ayur Gyan Nyas is taking on a preventative approach towards mental health issues and that is the need of the hour if the children are to become responsible citizens in the future. The social climate around us has changed and contemporary education only focuses on cognitive development. All education reformers talk about 'educating the whole child'.

A slower pace of life is integral to the mental well-being of the child, and also to their learning. We have over-structured our children's lives, not just in institutions but also in families. **In a structured environment, the child will have experiences but may not be able to enjoy those.**

Questioning stereotypes and encouraging critical thinking is another aspect of learning about ethics and universal responsibility. When confronted with stereotypes, we need to encourage children to get comfortable with 'questioning the stereotype' — how else can it be?

At the Akanksha Foundation and Dream a Dream, the facilitators undergo experiential training based on the Arc of Transformation. Once facilitators are a part of this process, they are in a space to understand and appreciate how much the journey of self-awareness positively impacts their daily life. They also understand the power of experiential learning. This helps them design similar transformative experiences for children. Having experienced it themselves, they are also in a position to better handle the complexities around executing such a program. Children are part of different sessions based on their age, awareness and articulation.

Other experts who have experienced the implementation of SEEL feel that it cannot be a topic discussed in isolation, but over time, the effort should be to integrate SEEL with everything else that the children are doing. For instance, if they lose a match, they could reflect on how they felt. **True integration will happen when the math and other subject teachers also undergo training in the SEE learning curriculum and can build the parallels to connect two concepts.** All adults dealing with children need a basic level of understanding of social-emotional issues. **The divide is no longer something we can afford to have.**

The SEE Learning curriculum, I feel, has been created perhaps with a sample of children abroad who might be more articulate and reflective. I often find that, given the socio-economic class of our children at Akanksha, we have to mellow it down. Hence the teachers and facilitators who are implementing this with children truly need to get trained. They also need to start practising this themselves to fully understand it. For instance, when a person is teaching kindness and compassion and not being kind or compassionate themselves, the child would not understand that. **What you are discussing is LIFE and each of us has different life experiences. It is not a subject being taught with a bunch of facts. Children can throw up a lot of surprises and the facilitator has to be very strong to a) First understand these multiple perspectives themselves, and b) To help the child navigate through those.** There was a time when children were asked to play a game which involved stepping in and stepping out corresponding to a 'yes' or 'no' response. At the end they were asked, "would you like to be happy?" and one would have imagined everyone would have stepped in for a 'yes'. But two children did not step in. One child said, "I do not want to be happy" and another child said, "I do not know what it is to be happy". Now what does the facilitator do at such moments? They can't just leave it at that and move on to something else. These are 'learning moments'. The teacher should feel some confidence in being able to handle this situation. We do not want to force these children to be happy. So these become very

sensitive and yet very powerful moments that a facilitator can face. (Akanksha Foundation)

If I had just a small window with a child, I would start with mindfulness, since that can also be taught to a 3-year-old, to become aware of their breath and how breath can be a very powerful medium to work on their emotions and themselves. The second thing we could do with them is — how habits are formed. What are habits? What are some cues and triggers that become habit-forming? And what are their rewards? Sensitise them to the idea that addictions or petty thefts can become habits that, later on, are perceived as crimes. That is the knowledge I would like to give them. **UNESCO talks about the fact that by 2030 soft skills like discernment or compassion are going to become far more important than computer skills. The problem is, everybody talks about these things but there is very little that is happening on the ground.** (Ayur Gyan Nyas)

As NGOs, we want to have complete control over the child's calendar. **We are under pressure to keep them engaged every minute. We have planned everything for every hour right up to the time they sleep.** Instead, we need to create safe physical spaces and let children run it. They should have the freedom to co-create and collaborate. For instance, we are creating a library cum toy centre. Earlier it was only going to be a library. Then we did not want it to become a serious environment where the child only goes and reads. Hence we thought of adding a toy centre to it. We imagine it as a safe space where children can be by themselves without an agenda. We think that environment is a very important part of childhood experiences. Every school should have spaces that are free for children to create memories. It applies to rescue homes too. Even there, volunteers come and conduct activities with children. (Shiksharth)

I**f SBT had three months with a child and something had to be prioritised within those three months, it should be SEL, resilience, acceptance**. **If the child acquires tools to feel good about themselves and not feel victimised then we might be in a better position to be able to use the resources that are offered to them.** The most important thing for a child to feel included is if he is heard and

"

understood. Language plays an important role. That does not mean we attempt to talk in Nepali or Bhojpuri but at least attempt to communicate in Hindi which might make the child comfortable. (Gubbachi Learning Centre)

What we need to ensure at our end is regularity. If there is consistency, sooner or later the child will learn. There should be regular sessions between the teacher and students. Many times they get diverted due to events and annual day preparations. (Teacher - SBT)

There should be workshops that would help an individual identify their own mental patterns that are unresourceful. There should be workshops not just for children but also for the trainers since all of us get into old thinking patterns and are not even aware of those. "Sab kuch badal raha hai, hence, evolving in thought is also important." (SBT Alumini)

The mental health team is seen as a separate unit. I dislike sitting alone and would often go out and offer psycho-social support to the staff too. The training of SEEL to all staff members is important. **It should not be that the child always has to go to a psychologist. What if the child is emotionally comfortable with another adult?** The child is passed on to the counselling room. (Erstwhile Mental health practitioner - SBT)

Emerging Narratives

online. It also offers an individual the element of choice which is very crucial to staying invested through the learning journey.

Curated content for reading, listening and viewing

Sometimes at shelter homes children struggle to read. Reading gaps can lead to learning gaps. Since they are not able to read, they spend a lot of time watching TV which does not have age-appropriate content.

In organisations where children have been exposed to curated stories and reading or viewing content, they have benefited in many ways. Empowering stories, as has been mentioned earlier, not only give the children a safe springboard to express their thoughts but also inspire them.

Organisations that use stories extensively have created content specifically keeping the context and needs of the children they work with in mind.

Once a bank of stories has been curated, if staff is trained in basic story-creating or telling techniques, then this could be one tool that they could adapt to the challenges they come across to reinforce messages of discipline, ownership, rights of children etc, amongst children.

While ideating about what is abundantly available today and almost everyone has access to, is the abundance of learning content online. Whatever an individual is interested in, it is possible to learn using audio-visual content

We actively engage in storytelling. We read curated stories to children and then facilitate a reflection circle to discuss what the group imbibed from it. We encourage an inquiry-based approach amongst children. For instance, a story could be about a child who was separated from his family, looked for support, did not find it and ended up doing some illegal activity. So, we discuss these things with children to let them know that these things happen and that when someone experiences any of this, they should share it with their teachers. Depending on how the children respond, the teachers then talk about those skills further. Children display different life skills while critically thinking about the stories they heard. Our life skills curriculum has modules on resilience, critical thinking, decision-making, growth mindset, self awareness and development, and empathy towards others. Our entire pedagogy and stories revolve in and around these pillars in our Harsh Johar Curriculum in Jharkhand. There are 9 skills. These real-life stories have been curated and adapted with a team of curriculum developers, who worked along with authors of these stories. (Dream a Dream)

We use the format of stories and discussions around stories so that things stay non-preachy. It is then about the third person and not you. There are 4 areas we cover - self-awareness, self-regulation, relationships and decision-making. The stories start to move from simple to complex. The simple ones make things explicit and do not assume that the child understands anything. The beauty of a story is that everyone can take away different things from it. (Sol's Arc)

A long time ago there was a girl from Jharkhand who used to work in my house. Every Sunday she would go to church and she had received a book from the church. Had all of the information

on Geography, English, Maths, Science. It had sentences written in big bold letters prompting the reader to look around them and apply whatever was written. For example, while walking from home to church, if you had ₹20 to buy something what would you do? Or observe the colour of the leaf. That girl used the book for three years, and at the end of three years, she was speaking good English and was able to handle money. It helped her become more aware and also apply whatever she has learnt. **It had just the right mix and the right level of content for a child that would help them learn but not feel overwhelmed. It had a good mix of practicality, approval, self-confidence, initiative and understanding. We have always looked at education from the lens of what the child is learning. We need to look at the curriculum to evaluate it for its applicability and age appropriateness.** However, we need to start talking to them about social issues much earlier since they see and experience all these things in the world and in the media. That is the shift in education that we need to think about. (Trustee SBT)

Concluding Thoughts

Life in a shelter home for a rescued child is a different world. A world which we understand very little about. A few steps into the journey, it was clear that, unlike a math problem that is stated, problems in life are seldom straightforward. In life, 'the problem' is not stated but needs to be formulated. But like a math problem, which inherently comes with cues that lead us to the solution, life situations also create trails of cues and if we unbundle the problem enough and keep following the trail, the journey to the solution starts to look shorter.

Organisations working with rescued children converge on the thinking that 'the emotional state of mind needs to settle down before any learning can happen. Pushing that thought further, organisations can think about these questions. What enables emotions to settle down? What creates a sense of self-esteem? What are the tools that can enable a child to make peace with their past? The research discussions documented in the report have touched up quite a few of these specifics.

One of the important aspects and an oft-heard narrative from experts is the role of the facilitator (or the adult) in the environment.

The residual association with the role of the teacher was that of conduit of knowledge. This thinking changed to what we see as dominant today — that the adult is not the repository of knowledge but one who can inspire a child to think, examine information critically, etc. The emerging thinking around the role of the adult, especially in the case of socio-emotional learning areas, is that the adult first experiences the learning and the transformation that comes along with it. Having gone

through the process, they are better equipped to act as catalysts in enabling the transformation of others. 'Enabling' is the key since the decision to transform has to come from within and the power to transform also lies within, which inspired the title of this report.

It is important to understand that socio-emotional learning is a new and complex space to navigate. A hurry to adopt these approaches with a half-baked understanding of the idea can do more damage than good. Every discipline comes with its vocabulary and sometimes this vocabulary can itself become a label that adults use casually and children internalise. For instance, while using vocabulary like problem solver v/s a non-problem solver or a learner v/s a non-learner, growth mindset v/s fixed mindset - it is important to understand that this journey is a continuum and these states are not to be viewed as binary i.e. a child who has this quality v/s one who does not. The same child in one context could display a fixed mindset whereas in another context could display a growth mindset and the key is to leverage the child's strength to nudge them on their journey of connecting with their power within.

Another challenge that could arise in adopting these approaches is when the adult approaches socio-emotional learning from the old codes of teaching that she could be accustomed to i.e. having discovered the knowledge herself, there is often an eagerness to see this discovery happen on the part of the child or the frustration of why the discovery is taking longer than imagined. When an adult is in this mental space, they do not acknowledge that every individual will have to undergo the journey of transformation at a pace that will be self-determined and unknown to anyone. We can water a plant and give it nutrients and sunlight but no one can predict when the plant will bloom.

Hence, with all the inputs that have come out of this research, we might arrive at some curriculum or approach which can really be relevant to the times children (and even rescued children) are living in these days, but this curriculum is not a non-living thing. It will be a living thing which will have to evolve with the facilitator who breathes life into it and not think of it as a training manual which somebody just runs. To that extent, the real work does not end at the point where the curriculum has been curated. It starts there.

One challenge heard most often during the research was that despite the best opportunities available, children were not willing to receive them, which led to frustration on both ends. The experiential approach has the potential to break past this impasse. We experienced this during the research while talking to experts who were closely associated with SEEL and mindfulness, and, as was evident from their calm energy, were also practitioners. Whatever the interviewee spoke, the interviewer was able to receive. And what the interviewer needed to ask, the interviewee was able to address without being explicitly asked. It came from a deeper understanding perhaps of the wholeness of that interaction, and the deeper purpose of the research.

The research also uncovered an important belief that limits our perspective on learning i.e. age as a variable that defines whether someone is considered a student or a teacher. When these boundaries blur, the learning and ownership of learning that gets created by a child is incomparable.

'Belonging' is a fundamental human need. What can a shelter home do to fulfil that?

Experts raised important questions about sympathy as a construct which may help adults (more than children) feel good in the short term but backfires in the long run. Sympathy keeps the child locked into the past and comes in the way of their acceptance of their situation. Sympathy also shines the light on the child's weakness instead of their strength.

The learning and education of the (rescued) children if viewed from a narrow academic lens does not prepare the child for life. In the context of learning, what is 'caught' by the child is much bigger and more impactful than what is 'taught'. Children learn from their daily interactions with each other, the staff, and the visitors and from what they see and experience in the physical space around them. An environment and experiences that create a pull, and inspire them to seek out and make connections on their own, create a process of learning without resistance, and such learning stays with the child much longer. And just like a textbook problem has implicit and explicit information, so do life situations. Only that in life, and especially so in times of abundance, the explicit information is overloaded but the implicit information is hidden. Learning pedagogies (stories, theatre, questioning stereotypes have been specifically mentioned by experts but there are many more) that help the child connect with these implicits unlock a part of the big puzzle of life for the child and it would not be wrong to stay that the effects of such learning are irreversible.

Lastly, in the quest to open-heartedly connect with the child, one of the things that works wonders is the attitude of 'wonder'. When faced with a conflicting situation, wondering and asking the child what made them say, do, or think like they did, instead of pronouncing judgment and making assumptions can give the adult in the environment a window into their thinking. Children very often do have a 'logic', that may be different from that of the adult and

uncovering this logic can be a fascinating journey in itself.

The report is intended to bring out the points of convergence in the thinking of the experts interviewed, as much as it is designed to bring out the unique working approaches of organisations working in the eco-system to facilitate opportunities for collaboration with each other wherever there is a need for adopting these approaches.

There is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in - Leonard Cohen

Going forward, may the light shine on

Hope more than resignation

Empathy more than sympathy

Acceptance more than judgement (of their past, of themselves, of each other)
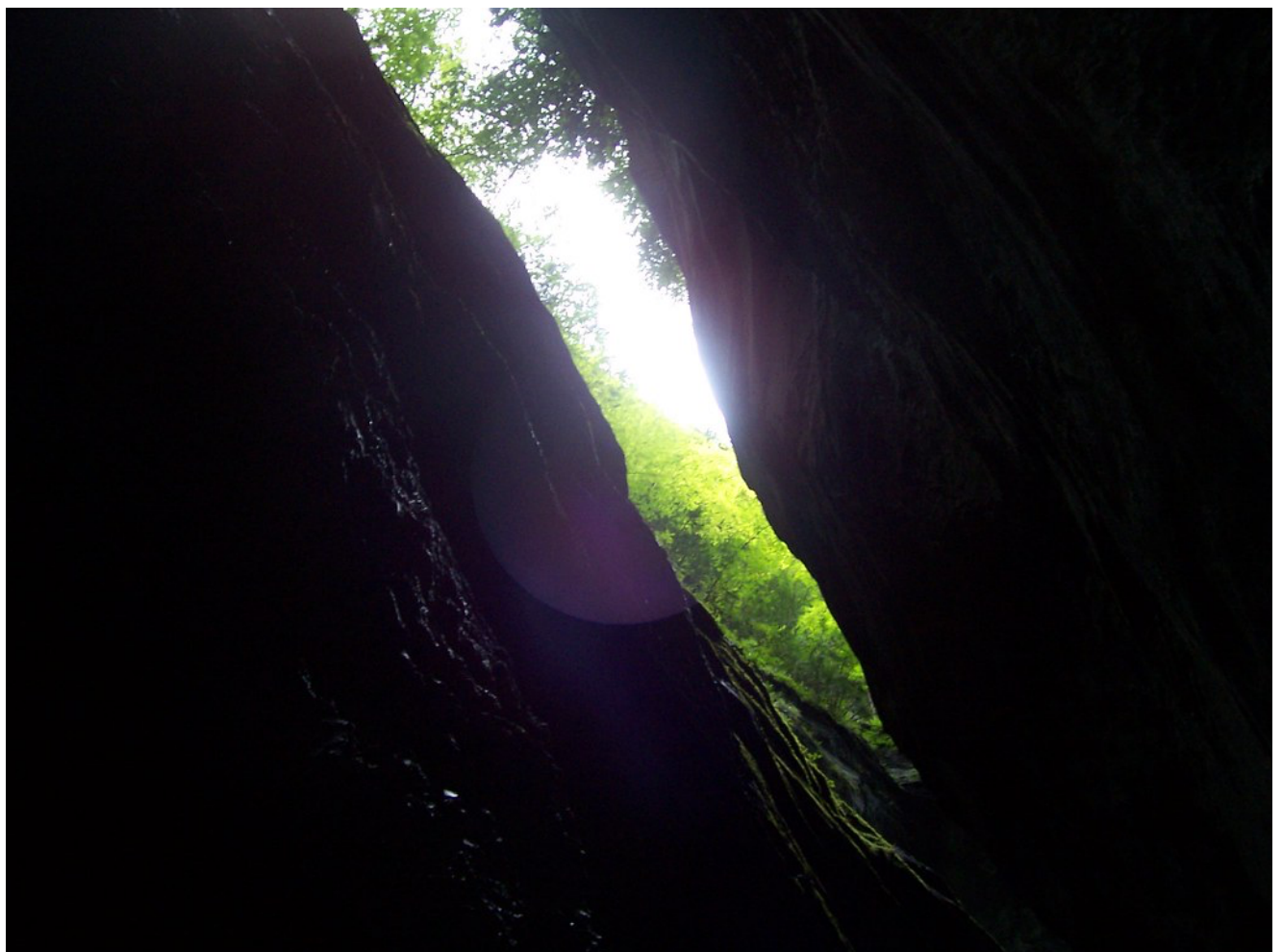
Strengths rather than limitations

Creating an inner sanctuary rather than yearning for home

Ownership (and the dignity that comes with it) rather than blame

Questioning stereotypes rather than shaming them

Looking at challenges like pauses and not full stops

Appendix

List of pictures used in the report

Colours of Rural life (School Life in Tamilnadu) - Page 9
https://www.flickr.com/photos/nithiclicks/47393681652

India Poverty Street Children - Page 21
https://www.needpix.com/photo/724758/india-poverty-street-children-free-pictures-free-photos-free-images-royalty-free

The Blind and the elephant - Page 23
Creator: Jono Hey | Credit: Jono Hey
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Golden Cage Parrot - Page 34
https://images.app.goo.gl/c4BfjudRS8KkHWzt7

India People Street Photography Free Photo - Page 50
https://www.needpix.com/photo/download/1070227/india-people-street-photography-free-pictures-free-photos-free-images-royalty-free-free-illustrations

Boy holding blackboard smiling - Page 53
https://www.pickpik.com/boy-school-laughing-children-indian-ahmedabad-43043

Varanasi Kid - smoke fan - Page 67
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India_-_Varanasi_kid,_smoke,_fan_-_0211.jpg

Children working beside a road - Page 76
https://pixahive.com/photo/children-working-beside-a-road/

Children in a street celebrating Holi festival - Page 80
https://pixahive.com/photo/children-in-a-street-celebrating-holi-festival/

Delhi smiling girl - Page 85
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India_-_Delhi_smiling_girls_-_4698.jpg

Girl reading - Page 87
https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1341967

Looking through a crack in the gorge - Page 90
https://www.flickr.com/photos/bods/2807561013

About illume

illume is a specialist research and consulting firm based in Bangalore co-founded by Reshma Bachwani and Ravi Paritosh who bring together their skills in consumer insight, design research and visual communication to work on issues that involve decoding any aspect of a brand idea, a consumer behaviour or a cultural phenomenon.

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A post-graduation in Marketing & a diploma in Clinical Hypnotherapy, she is the author of two award-winning research papers (on subconscious research & design research presented at the Market Research Society of India seminar in the years 2008 and 2010) and has contributed to several research publications.

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