

An Initiative for Emotional Wellbeing of Students

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Abstract

The paper is a reflective account of a special educator taking over the role of a counsellor (class 6th and 7th) during the scenario of lockdown and home-confinement which was necessitated due to COVID-19 which led to reorganization of the system. Initially students were happy about school holidays but soon the pandemic created fear and uncertainty. The ambiguity around school reopening created a disturbed the psychosocial environment for children. Although siblings, parents, grandparents were at home but not being able to meet with peers, go out, or engage in co-curricular classes further added to anxiety contributing to emotional uncertainty among students. The paper therefore dwells into the activities and strategies used by a special educator to understand the emotions and feelings of students. It also describes strategies used to reach out to students and facilitate them during this scenario where “normal” is being redefined.

Keywords: *acceptance, emotions, pandemic, psychosocial environment*

Introduction

The entire world is going through what is unexpected. Everyone is going through an emotional turmoil in some or the other way. As schools got shut in the middle of exams, some students were happy with cancellation of exams whereas, some felt bad about the hard-work they put in the entire year for these final exams. Complete lock-down was implemented, which was a new experience for everyone that made everyone stay at home. This led to families spending more time together. But as the period of lockdown extended and resuming of old normal seemed to be a distant thing, the need was felt to study the psychosocial environment.

The affected routine life brought about many changes in the lives of children such as academics loss, no co-curricular activities, no interaction with peers and changed definitions of classrooms. As students were just beginning to get familiar with the virtual medium, soon the summer break was declared that resulted in classes being put on hold. This time gave students, teachers and schools a breather to rethink the classrooms and teaching-learning process. The school, among many adaptations, emphasised on the importance of counselling sessions for students. They were planned for at least once a week. But in the given scenario where teachers were even more occupied with adjusting to this new medium of interaction with students, they were seldom left with enough time to indulge in informal discussions with students.

The concern was brought up by many teachers on different occasions amongst themselves. The entire scenario of pandemic brought emotional stress everywhere including children. Several conversations with parents with special needs revealed that initially the parents were engaging their children in new activities and were able to spend family time together. As the school remained closed, and several other factors such as monitoring studies along with their own work (work from home), non-availability of help at home, it became difficult to engage children every day in different activities and cater to the socio-emotional needs of children. Frustration of being unable to meet these needs was causing parents a lot of pain.

During this constantly changing phase, students needed constant outreach programmes for smooth transition to online teaching, virtual classrooms, changing dynamics of classrooms and staying at home 24x7. It demanded monitoring, adjustment and support- ‘*Students wanted to be heard*’. One period each week was allocated the four sections of grade 6th and 7th, as a counsellor This paper is a reflective account of my experiences as a counsellor and interaction with students- their experiences, needs, desires, emotions.

Initiation

Rapport formation is a crucial part of any counselling setting. While understanding what children wanted to engage in, in this pandemic

time, I gathered their views on “Would you rather”. Some of the answers were: “*Although I like this new medium sitting at home but I miss my friends and teachers so would prefer school over online classes*”, “*I like School as I could be little naughty with teachers and enjoy with my friends*”, “*like home-made food and my mumma is trying new dishes for me at home only these days*”. It was evident from these sessions that students were getting a platform to express themselves freely, where they were not being judged. It also gave them an opportunity to resume their conversations with peers and friends.

Experiencing time of COVID

From the earlier sessions emerged the need to explore the theme of discussing COVID and associated emotions and feelings of students. The shift to talk about this was gradual. In the beginning students were asked to share about the good thing(s) lockdown brought. Students mentioned aspects like “*No Pollution*” during complete lockdown. They got a chance to spend with family, which was evident from the responses, “*Family time with all members together at home*”, “*Sharing of Responsibility*” such as helping their parents in various household chores. Students also highlighted their increased mother’s role in managing the entire house. Most of the students were empathetic towards their parents’ increased responsibilities, especially mother. They also expressed that they are learning many things from their parents such as ways in order to manage their time productively, multitasking and taking care of everyone at the same time. These learnings were possible as they are always at home and are able to observe several facets of their parents’ personality. They also mentioned that many times they felt like meeting their friends, relatives, and going out but they also expressed that they understand the safety aspect and therefore indulged themselves in learning new activities on their own through online sources or from adults at home. Thus, these sessions helped the students to understand the importance of focusing on staying positive and finding a silver lining in every situation no matter how difficult it is. It showed students’ coping mechanism and their will to develop the attitude of learning something from every situation they are.

Taking inspiration from a quote by Rachel Samson, an Australian Psychologist, “*If little*

boys are given neither opportunities nor support to express their emotions, are we surprised when they become men who struggle to understand emotions in themselves and others?”, following sessions focused on discussing emotions and feelings with students. They can see through different perspectives when they are made to think through explorations and when discussion is facilitated around what could they see? Each week one emotion was taken up through an emoticon. The interaction of the session followed around the following points:

- What makes them feel so? (happy, confused, angry etc.)
- How do they know you are in this emotion? (happy, sad, shy etc.)
- What thoughts do they have when they are happy, sad, angry etc.
- How does the body react? (when feeling so?)
- What can be done to overcome negative emotions?

It brought forth the different perspectives of students. The first day discussion was around Happiness. Students mentioned about what makes them happy “*I am happy when I get a surprise*”, “*good marks in exams make me happy*”, “*when teachers and other elders appreciate it, it makes me happy*”. they further mentioned “*I want to remain happy always*”, “*I am not sad means, I am happy*” mentions one of the students. “*I have a smile on my face*”, “*I am feeling excited, I dance at times when I am happy*”.

Next session focused on emotion: Sad. Students responded that they felt sad in the situations such as “*I start feeling low*”, “*I feel tired as well*”, “*I don’t want to talk to anyone*”, “*I get irritated, eventually get angry*”. Students shared that while attempting question paper, either choosing between different options or recalling between similar answers, also confusion while shopping came into “*I was confused other day when my mom liked black top but I wanted to buy red colour*”, “*I got confused when my sister was in one of team while playing a game and wanted me to join her team, but I wanted to join other team as it had strong members*”, “*whether I should share my personal feelings to my friends or not*” were few examples shared by students. Some situations where confusion happens were: Similarities in options - When Multiple options -

Obstacles/hurdles - When it is about winning/losing - Sharing personal experiences

Students also shared how they overcame a situation of confusion. They mentioned actions such as looking at benefits, likeness /dis-likeness, trying new things, risk involved elements of exploration etc.

Anger-Students mentioned following situations which made them angry- when they were already irritated with something and parents were not listening to them, when they were pulled away from their comfort zone. The elder person was scolding and not able to meet expectations parents held for them.

The discussions in the several sessions with students revealed that children's feelings and emotions are valuable to others and their emotional expressions give wealth of social information. There is a need to be aware and accept the emotions of children. Parents who themselves believe in the value of emotion also understand the benefit of its experience and expression. These emotions provide opportunities for children to learn and develop (Gottman et al., 1996; Parker et al., 2012; Stelter & Halberstadt, 2011).

The parents who value both positive and negative emotions are ought to create environments that are more emotionally expressive, sensitive to, and accepting of children's emotion as compared to parents who do not value emotion; such beliefs may thus provide children with opportunities to learn how to express and identify their own and others' emotions. (Lunkenheimer et al., 2007)

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Reflection

Experience of being a counsellor and interacting with children online to facilitate their self-exploration, enabled the researcher to reflect on the role of counsellor especially in these unprecedented circumstances. In today's time of uncertainty arising due to COVID, children are going through a phase that they have never experienced before. Throughout the school years children continue to develop self-confidence by indulging in new things. This is a time they need encouragement so that they can explore new facets of themselves. Guidance can be effectively used to instill the basics of socializing and accepting the constantly changing phase. Through various activities an attempt was made to uncover the layers of emotions which are difficult for children to express. Although schools can't recreate school experiences where children used to interact face to face with teachers and peers and learning happened in a structured environment, these sessions with counsellor provide spaces to children to have hope of returning to the old normal. These sessions gave platform to children to express their emotions that helped them to understand themselves and others, take decisions, and build more meaningful relationships with parents and peers.

It also placed utmost importance on the role of school counselor in a school and the lives of children. They play multiple roles including social and emotional educator, academic adviser, conflict mediator, wellness coach, mental health therapist, educational collaborator and family liaison.