Addressing the Developmental and Psychological Needs of Adolescents through Mental Health Service in Schools

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Abstract *There is no debate about the fact that mental health services in schools must become an integral component of the school curriculum. While this is not a new assertion, the truth is that despite reiteration for the need for mental health services in schools expressed in various policies, programmes and forums, their organised availability in most schools remains negligible or at best, gets restricted to very scanty and piecemeal efforts. An attempt is made in the present paper to understand what mental health in the school scenario means and spell out the significance of a mental health programme in schools. The key idea expressed is that the developmental needs and challenges of adolescents can be best addressed through an effective school mental health programme. The essential components of what constitutes an effective school mental health programme have also been discussed. The paper also highlights the role and participation of teachers in the school mental health programme and how they can be built into a rich resource.*

Keywords: mental health, school mental health programme, adolescence.

Understanding the meaning of Mental Health in the context of Schooling

There are various ways in which mental health has been conceptualised. For instance, psychoanalysis defines the "healthy" state of mind as one of self-awareness of one's unconscious and repressed feelings. Behaviourism defines it as adjustment towards societal demands and expectations. The humanistic paradigm sees mental health as the development of self along with the ability to lead a meaningful life in society (Ranganathan, 2012). The development of self here means the ability to become self aware and self directed with the ultimate goal of realizing one's fullest potential and deriving maximum satisfaction from self and society. The World Health Organisation (2001) defines the contours of mental health as "having the ability to adapt and adjust to the changing demands of the environment, enjoy fulfilling relationships and lead a satisfactory life".

The position that I would choose to support is the humanistic perspective. For one thing, it is a refreshing departure from the definitions used in clinical psychology wherein the focus is on the presence or absence of mental disorders. It instead emphasises the positive development and subjective well-being of persons as indicators of mental health. It takes cognisance of the fact that children and adolescents, during the process of growing up face numerous stressors and challenges, but recognises that these are transitional and so, with some support and preventive steps, they can be enabled to remain happy and buoyant. It reposes faith in their intrinsic abilities. The role of the significant adults around them is seen to be that of facilitators, who can provide support and a conducive environment within the given set of conditions. Thus mental health should be understood as a state of being that has to be promoted in all individuals, rather than be considered as the treatment of a disorder. It is in the promotional aspect of mental health in the lives of children and adolescents that the role of the school is of utmost significance.

Need for Mental Health in Schools

Malvika Kapur (1997) in her work on "Mental Health in Schools", almost two decades ago, perceived schools as the "best places to develop

mental health programmes." Spreading awareness about mental health issues, planning and implementing preventive, promotional and curative activities, providing adequate guidance and counselling services are all initiatives and services which can reach children and adolescents only through the medium of school. The argument that favours schools for housing mental health services also rests on the growing need for facilitation that children and adolescents have, given the complexities and pace of modern life. Also, since schools have as their main aim the holistic development of all students and enabling each one of them to build a firm sense of self and identity, the need for nurture, support and facilitation is immense.

The Kothari Commission (1964-66), more than fifty years ago had also advocated the importance of mental health services in schools. It held that, "Guidance services have much wider scope and function than merely that of assisting students in making educational and vocational choices. The aims of guidance are both adjustive and developmental. Mental health related services were therefore advocated as an "integral part of education" and "meant for all students" (Grover, 2006).

However, the kind of school services for addressing the mental health issues of students continue to be very inadequate and somewhat indifferent to the needs of school children. I would like to cite an incident to illustrate this. A sixth class student from a government school was asked by the principal to call up her home and ask her father to come and pick her up in the middle of school hours. The reason, it was said, was that the girl was "not well". She was working on some school assignments in a free period, when she suddenly heard a voice asking her to bang her head, which she obeyed. Her sudden head banging on the classroom wall near her seat startled her classmates and the teacher. She was escorted to the principal's office by the substitute teacher. While she was waiting for her parents to pick her up in the school playground, a few other teachers and staff members came to inquire, consoled her, and then they walked away to take their respective classes. The sports teacher was given the responsibility of

staying with her till her parents came to take her home. One of these teachers interpreted this incident as a spiritual visit by a Goddess. He concluded confidently that Goddess Kali had appeared and ordered the girl to do so. This was followed by a ritualistic muttering of mantras and silent prayers to Goddess Kali by the teacher. He placed his hand on the girl's forehead and asked if she was feeling better now and whether her head was lighter, to which she meekly nodded. When her father reached the school, the same teacher explained his version of the incident and its causation and prescribed some articles for donation to the nearby temple as a solution, which the father noted down diligently on a piece of paper. This incident draws attention to how mystical and unscientific approaches in the belief systems of teachers can constitute the basis of classifying and reaching out to students in need. In this scenario, the real problem that the student is facing ceases to be important. Since adolescents are prone to various stressors, early identification and handling of their problems more scientifically, in tandem with established guidance and counselling approaches can be carried out only if mental health services become an integral part of the school organization. Apart from dealing with the problems, concerns and issues of students, an effective mental health programme can be also utilized to spread awareness about mental health issues and how life can be lived and experienced more positively. For instance, the challenges at different developmental stages that require transitions to be made, can be better addressed. During adolescence, preparation for puberty and the emotional highs and lows that accompany it, issues related to friendship and relationships, getting into appropriate academic schedules to deal with growing academic demands, dealing with peer pressure and resisting substance misuse are some clearly identifiable adolescent mental health concerns that need facilitation and guidance. Mental Health services can take care of these.

Parents and family members tend to rely on schools for the well being of their children and trust the recommendations made by school for their children. Given that this is a big responsibility, it is necessary for schools to have the readiness for this.

Expressions India

Mental health services would ensure this readiness.

Guidance and awareness programmes such as life skills, sexuality education, adolescence education etc. that help students to lead more informed and happy lives, can also be subsumed under the school mental health services. Individual counselling for students on a need basis can be subsumed within this service, irrespective of whether it is a simple guidance issue or a deep seated problem for which help is being sought. I would now like to discuss some features that characterise adolescence in India so that a better interface can be established between their needs and mental health services in schools.

The Indian Adolescent

The Indian adolescent is a unique entity. In contemporary times, he/she faces the situation of being in a transitional phase of Indian society - traditional values at one end and technological advancement and globalization at the other (Brown, Larson and Saraswathi, 2002). In such a scenario, the ambiguity of values that adolescents observe in the adult world, absence of powerful role models, increasing gaps between aspirations and possible achievement, not surprisingly lead to alienation and identity diffusion. Compounding this problem is the fact that because of the pluralistic nature of Indian society, there is not one but several adolescences. Caste, region, gender, linguistic group and religion all impact adolescence, creating several adolescent experiences (Choudhary, 2014). Adolescent vulnerability and proneness to 'at risk' factors have been highlighted as important adolescent issues that merit attention. Globalization has led to fast changing family dynamics in the country. Increasing migration and urbanisation uproots families and situates them in a vulnerable position due to lack of social support and firm cultural ideals (Brown et al., 2002). In the face of marginalisation this increases the risk of adolescents towards crime and delinquency. Globalization and its consequences such as the overpowering use of information and communication technology, increasing consumerism and exposure to media have altered the experience of adolescence (Thapan, 2004). Television and social media dominate the lives of urban youth. They define their choices and shape their ideals and expectations.

Acquisition of knowledge and learning of various subject matters in the formal schooling format is in itself a challenging task. Inflexible and demanding academic tasks can become burdensome for students. Setting up of mental health services in schools usually counters the stress created by such demands and helps the students develop their intellectual capabilities without compromising on their emotional well- being.

Aims of School mental health services

Based on the above, some of the features and objectives of effective mental health services in schools may be understood as follows: *Nurturing human potential*: Here the underlying belief is that the individual is inherently good and "given certain conditions, an individual's potential to make choice and decision can be utilised for maximum benefit to the individual as well as society" (NCERT, 2008). Hence, the focus is on developing the human uniqueness, worth, dignity and potential. *Building Self-Reliance:* The methods adopted for engaging with the students should aim at making them understand and accept themselves better and become more self- directed. They will then take responsibility for their own lives. The assumption underlying this is that each individual is seen as having potential, which can be nurtured through providing them basic guidance in the form of life skills and counselling. The relationship of the mental health professional, which may even be the teacher with the students is seen as that of a facilitator, who enables the student to overcome and resolve their problems on their own. *Promoting Holistic Development:* The requirement here is to give the developmental needs of adolescents due recognition not only in their educational, but also in their personal and socio-emotional spheres. This would mean that the school mental health services would encompass very diverse activities like career guidance, socio emotional counselling, life skills development, nurturing creativity, awareness activities and so on.

This would also mean that the school mental health programme is not limited to a disease-treatment and is envisioned to support each individual student in their developmental journey. The focus of student services would be on building capacities and enhancing capabilities that include promotion, prevention, treatment as well as rehabilitation. *Accepting diversity*: The pluralism and socio cultural diversity that mark adolescence in India require an attitude of acceptance of the diversity and catering to varied contextualised needs of students. After RTE (2009), inclusion and accepting diversity have become mandatory. School mental health services can help to build up acceptance of this and propagate the attitude of inclusion. *Professional development of Teachers as Counsellors:* Teachers, by virtue of their roles and responsibilities are inadvertently counsellors as well. Students' needs, well-being, conflict resolution, harmony with peers, goal development process etc, are all part of their spectrum of responsibilities. This should thus get professionally acknowledged and as part of their professional development at both the pre-service and in-service levels, their roles as counsellors must be acknowledged and addressed. They can be provided training for this so that the everyday issues of students and their developmental needs can be taken care of by them. For more complex issues, networks with other professionals can be created. Here also teachers can play the referral and mediation role. *Generating awareness in the Community:* The school mental health programme is an important link between the school and community. Teachers' awareness about the community and interaction with community members that include parents and other significant influential persons, can go a long way in tapping and using community resources and build better home-school-society continuity for students. *On a Concluding Note.*

As can be seen from the above discussion, the aims of mental health services in schools are very broad and deal with a variety of different issues. The NCF (2005) talks about "connecting knowledge to life outside the school" for students, "enriching the curriculum to provide for overall development of children.." and, "nurturing an over-riding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country" as some of its basic aims. These aims converge with the overarching goals of school mental health services and programmes. They point towards the need for an integrated approach which once again supports the need for mental health services being integral to the school.

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