

Educating Heart and Mind: Imparting Universal Ethics Education in Schools in India

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Abstract

In our increasingly dynamic and interconnected world, implementing social emotional and ethical learning in school settings is a promising approach to prepare students to be global citizens who can navigate a complex world in a responsible way that can contribute to their own and others' flourishing.

This paper discusses our experiences as a non-profit organization in introducing Social, Emotional and Ethical Education in various schools in India. Our work, inspired by writings of HH The Dalai Lama, centers around developing a curriculum founded on the basic human values for individual and collective flourishing.

The work explores three domains of learning (personal, social and systemic) based on the four dimensions of Universal Ethics for fostering wellbeing and happiness (restraint, virtues, compassion, discernment and universal responsibility). The approach includes creating a safe and caring school climate, forging better home-school partnerships, and a pedagogy informed by social-emotional and ethical concerns.

Key Words: Social and Emotional Learning, Mindfulness, Ethics, Education, Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

My contention is, first, that we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and, second, that we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others. (Noddings, 1995)

If we look at the trend across the world, there has been a steep rise in the hate and violence among youth. The young adults have been resorting to violence far more than ever witnessed in history. It would not be any stretch of imagination to say that the violence has penetrated not just into our actions, also in our thoughts and values. We justify aggression and violence in the name of man-made divides such as nation, religion, culture, race, caste, class and so on. The age of perpetrating crime has been noted to be steeply lowering and the nature of crimes becoming more heinous.

India is home to the largest adolescent population in the world. (Chandramouli C, 2011) During this period, adolescents undergo many psychosocial and physiological changes making them more prone to various stresses. A study conducted to ascertain stress and mental health issues amongst Indian students revealed that nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of the Indian students reported stress due to academic pressure (Deb et al., 2015). Various studies carried out after the year 2000 revealed that the prevalence of stress among Indian adolescents varied between 13% and 45%. (Talwar, 2014)

Education has proven to be the most effective tool for human development in the past few centuries. It has impacted human lives in deepest and strongest ways that can ever be imagined. Our thoughts, values, skills, lives have been governed by the education that we received and followed. Each year consists of approximately 6,000 waking hours. Children on average, spend about 1,000 hours in school. Not including after-school programs, most children spend about six hours per day in school – fewer in lower grades and more in higher ones. This is among one of the lower figures globally, where average would range anywhere between 6-8 hours per day – taking the average number of hours per year between 1200 - 1600.

Can we then say that this increasing trend of violence and mental health issues among adolescents points towards one direction? It shows the absence of skills to express and communicate, co-exist and accommodate, make realistic expectations from ourselves as well as others, face rejection and challenges; and many other values such as universal love and care. Is it then fair to say that in the past few decades, education has failed us as human race - globally?

EDUCATION IN INDIA

Total number of schools in India is very difficult to determine. However, it is safe to assume that the number is in 7 figures – and counting. Total number of recognized schools in India as per report published by Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2018 is 15,22,346. (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2018).

Numerous papers have been written and researches conducted in various countries to understand the correlation with education and the impact it may have on such behaviours. This

paper outlines an impact assessment of introducing curriculum-based Universal Ethics Education in Schools in India. It is impossible for one organization to fill the gap and it can be safely assumed that there is a lot of scope to serve the needs and make contributions.

In the past almost seven decades, education in India has seen revolutionary transformations in modern teaching and learning methodologies. This has impacted the generations in more ways than one. On one hand where the educated Indian youth has made its mark globally as one of the best skilled groups across multiple industries, on the other hand it has lost the ancient mark of skills required for the profession as well as for life. The challenges posed by materialism and competition are not being addressed in this education system. Skills to cope with such pressures is being increasingly over-looked, leaving behind a large population absolutely clueless about how to live a life of compassion and kindness.

The need of the hour in India is to radicalize education to become more pragmatic, research-oriented and focus on creating future leaders who are not only successful professionals but also successful human beings. The time has come to intertwine western pedagogy with ancient Indian education philosophy.

The complexities of our times call for equipping the younger generation with the skills they need to survive and flourish. A successful education cannot be confined to mere academic performance but also focus on cultivating an understanding that can promote behaviours that are conducive to their own and others' well-being. We need a new updated way of thinking, one that acknowledges our interdependence and the necessity of resolving problems and instigating change through dialogue and collaboration.

UNIVERSAL ETHICS EDUCATION

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) has been on an upward swing across many countries in the past decade. It emphasizes on addressing the social and emotional needs of the child at different stages of life, and developing skill sets to meet these appropriately. There have been multiple approaches and programmes developed and funded by the United Nations and various other bodies locally. Self-awareness, self-management, empathy, social skills, and good decision-making—are now the core abilities taught in SEL. One feature still missing from schools—even most that teach SEL—is helping students cultivate care and compassion towards self, others and environment.

Universal Ethics Education (UEE) framework build on the innovative and inspiring work done in social and emotional learning and adds on other aspects of ethical learning. It is believed that the dilemmas associated with growing up in school life, when attached with ethics, will lead towards a long term skill building that is more likely to ensure success and satisfaction as a human being.

UEE is grounded in the idea that education can and should be expanded to foster the values and competencies that lead to greater happiness for both individuals and society at large. It is based on the premise of Ethics that are universally applicable, a concept prefaced and promulgated by His Holiness The Dalai Lama XIV himself. If basic human values are to be brought within the purview of general education for all people, they cannot be based on a single religion, culture, or ideology. Rather, they must be based on the universal realities of entire

humanity. (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 2011). In our world where we are facing increasing levels of misunderstanding across religions, the introduction of Universal ethics into education can be a powerful way for promoting inter-religious understanding and productive dialogue among people of diverse belief systems.

HH The Dalai Lama has been one of the most vocal advocates of what he calls “a new approach to universal ethics” that can be promoted in the public sphere, including the educational settings. He has called for an approach to ethics that is not even subtly or implicitly religious or biased, in order to ensure that it is truly universal. (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 2011).

The idea that cultivating basic human values can benefit oneself and others is rapidly gaining credible and popular ground. The United Nations’ 2016 edition of World Happiness Report notes that many people are skeptical about the inherent altruistic nature of man. They believe that human nature is inherently selfish and we should just accept that fact. After all, it is the fittest who survive but this crude form of Darwinism is quite contrary to the modern understanding of human nature and of human evolution, since it is the human instinct to cooperate which has given humans their extraordinary power over most other vertebrate species. The fact is that we have two natures, one selfish and one altruistic, and it is the function of our ethical culture to promote the altruist within us over the egotist. (Helliwell, Layer & Sachs, 2016). The report goes on to reiterate that there is an ethical vacuum that needs to be addressed in a way that is both convincing and inspiring. It exhorts us to care passionately about the happiness of others. It has a universal appeal- capacity to inspire, by mobilising the benevolent part of every human being. (Helliwell et. al. 2016)

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY AT AGN

AyurGyan Nyas (AGN) was established in 2014 with a vision to empower educators and students to foster basic human values of kindness, compassion, empathy, tolerance, forgiveness and love. Since inception, AGN and the core team that has come together to work for a common cause of addressing the gap in present day education by introducing Social, emotional and Ethical education as an integral part of the curriculum in present education system.

AGN has been developing curriculum on the four dimensions of Universal Ethics, which will be imparted sequentially to help the student to regulate his/her emotions and behaviour, ultimately making them happier, healthier, academically competent and more adept in facing the challenges of the modern world. The idea is to work across the three domains of learning (personal, social and systemic) and on the four dimensions on universal ethics for happiness (restraint, virtues, compassion, discernment and universal responsibility) for fostering peace and happiness.

Effective management of emotions is one of the first steps towards developing one’s holistic self. The first step is, thus, naming emotions accurately. This helps individuals be clearer about what is going on inside— essential both to making clear headed decisions and to managing emotions throughout life. With children especially, getting it wrong can throw them off track. For instance, girls who develop eating disorders as teens have been found to confuse sadness and hunger when they are still in elementary school—and end up binge eating in their

teen years to soothe their distress. That, in turn, sets the stage for eating problems in later life. (Goleman & Senge, 2014)

In unpleasant situations, we are prone to act impulsively and give in to our irrational dispositions, and cause self-harm and harm to others in the process. To identify such dispositions and to control them is thus what 'Ethics of Restraint' trains individuals to do (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1999). They will learn to identify their emotions and the physical responses associated with them, as well as the thoughts generated in the undisciplined mind by using relevant techniques and methods.

Once the skill of restraint from negative behaviour is mastered, the second step is to cultivate positive emotions conducive to genuine happiness. (His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1999). One must then make concentrated efforts to indulge in more positive emotions and carry out virtuous actions that benefits one and all, including the environment.

Ethics of Compassion is one of the most important virtues that UEE seeks to cultivate in children. It is both a virtue and an ethical precept. Various levels of compassion are discussed and the process of differentiation between empathy and sympathy. The benefits of compassion on one's mind and body, and their external world will be learnt by the students, along with activities that internalize the value of compassion in them through present moment awareness and mind-mapping techniques.

The vision of ethics based education is to develop individuals that are responsible for the world and the society that they live in. 'Ethics of Discernment and Universal Responsibility' builds upon the ethics previously acquired and help the students to build a resolve within themselves to make ethical choices keeping in mind the welfare of all human beings. Students learn how to make a distinction between judgments, decisions and discernment; and learn the importance of discernment; therefore, using these embodied knowledge in their own lives and in promoting peace, care and fairness in the society.

So far course material on Ethics of Restraint and Ethics of Virtues has been developed. This will be followed by Ethics of Compassion and later Ethics of Discernment & Universal Responsibility. Each module consists of a training manual for teachers and Workbook for children. Each Workbook is accompanied by a Teacher's Manual to include methodologies, alternate activities, highlighter points and core concepts for teachers to follow. These steps are taken to minimize loss of intent and content that is inevitable in a cascading model.

The methodology is a multi-directional intervention where we partner with schools who share the same ideology of creating a caring classroom to produce future leaders who are also successful human beings. The AGN team takes the training material to teachers for a Two-day Introduction and Sensitization workshop. These two days focus on developing the skills and equipping the participating teachers to face, accept and improve their emotions and expressions. The training manuals, which have been carefully and rigorously drafted by Team AGN, are also handed to each participating teacher for referencing later as these things are difficult to understand and apply in just two days. We work intensively with the teachers to ensure they inculcate intended embodiment of "ethical" state.

This is followed by a one-day training of teachers, after approximately two months, to introduce the Book of Restraint, the workbook for children that has been developed in-house at AGN for students. Through this one day, sessions focus on recap of previous workshop, to

provide discussions and clarity, followed by introduction to the workbook for children. A hands-on experience is provided to the teachers, under the supervision of AGN Trainers and Consultants, to simulate at least two activities that are required to be done in classroom environment by the teachers. They then carry out the curriculum to equip the students to be mindful, conscientious, and empowered guided by kindness and other virtues such as forgiveness and compassion.

It is important to note here that AGN does not seek to create a direct point of contact with students. It has been understood, particularly in India where the vast diversity in its population on region, religion, caste, food, language etc. provides multiple fault lines; that the teacher is the best person to contextualize the material and transact with students.

The approach includes a theory of change that involves moving through levels, beginning with ‘acquired knowledge’, moving to ‘critical analysis’ and concluding with ‘embodied understanding’.

For basic human values to move from merely being “head knowledge” to taking root deeply within the hearts and minds of students, what is needed is the repeated application of practical skills combined with a theoretical understanding. The Greeks called this *praxis*: the process by which a knowledge or skill becomes embodied and fully realized. If this is neglected in education, students may know intellectually what values are being taught, but may not come to embody those values in their lives, and therefore would not derive benefit from them.

Figuratively, this can be understood as knowledge moving from “head” to “heart” to “hand.” While all three are forms of knowledge, they denote successively deeper states of knowing. As noted, the sources of knowledge in the approach of universal ethics are common sense, common experience, and scientific findings.

From a universal ethics perspective, received knowledge might include understanding on a definitional level the meaning of compassion, empathy and virtues, and some of the scientific explanations about these states, without having achieved any conviction within oneself about their actual importance for one’s life. To be transformative, however, received knowledge needs to be brought to a level of critical insight. This can happen through analysis, reason, investigation, personal reflection, stories, discussions and other activities. Critical insight refers to “a-ha” moments in which students realize for themselves what they had learned previously on a more intellectual or abstract level. The material becomes concrete, real, and personally relevant to one’s life. This reflects a new perspective on the matter derived from a personal experience of recognition.

Also important at this stage is that students seek to apply their knowledge to their own lives and the practical situations they encounter; without this, the received knowledge can remain impersonal and purely intellectual. This process leads to critical insight and a deeper level of conviction. To return to the examples of compassion and empathy, here the student understands these mental states not only on an intellectual level, but deepens that knowledge to attain conviction in the importance of developing sensitivity to others’ suffering and wishing to help alleviate it.

The deepest level of understanding is embodied understanding, which typically comes through a process of deep and sustained familiarization and habituation. At this point, knowledge has become second-nature and a matter of who one *is*, rather than something one

has learned. Repeated reflection, enactive exercises, and immersion in a school culture that imbues these values will facilitate the achievement of embodied understanding.

The pedagogy used in the curriculum range from using physical manipulatives, tapping into student's visualization and imaginative capabilities to inquiry based reflection. In addition, teachers are provided with a manual that explicitly states the learning objectives, materials are carefully sequenced to promote progressive learning and teacher trainings are specifically focused on ensuring that every child masters the content.

APPLICATION OF MINDFULNESS IN UEE

Specific techniques such as mindful awareness can enhance this deepening of knowledge, especially as research on neuroplasticity suggests that repeated and sustained concentration on a task appears to be a key factor in inducing neural change.

Mindfulness has been described as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)

Early research results on three illustrative mindfulness-based teacher training initiatives suggest that personal training in mindfulness skills can increase teachers' sense of well-being and teaching self-efficacy, as well as their ability to manage classroom behavior and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students. (Black, D.S., 2015).

A study by researchers at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the Waisman Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison shows that adults can be trained to be more compassionate. The report, published by Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, found that training adults in compassion can result in greater altruistic behavior and related changes in neural systems underlying compassion. (Christopher Bergland, 2013)

Research points to improved measures of attention following mindfulness training with children too. Since 2005, 14 studies of programs that directly train students in mindfulness have collectively demonstrated a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits to both elementary (six studies) and high school (eight studies) students. These include improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue. (Meiklejohn et. al., 2012)

Hence, in the Universal Ethics curriculum one of the primary goals has been to ensure that mindfulness activities are spread across the training of students and not a one-time or arbitrary activity. The mindfulness exercises are conducted regularly and consistently with different variations to ensure optimum efficacy and retention among students, leading to a gradual natural embodiment. It includes age-appropriate body and mind practices that aim to increase focused attention, social competencies, and emotional self-regulation. This is done through focused attention on breath and sensory experiences; awareness of thoughts and emotions; movement practices; and caring or kindness practices. The critical insights that are gained are sustained through mindful awareness coupled with periods of holding and sitting

with these insights without distraction such that they are brought to an embodied level of automaticity. The intention is that, through sustained practice, mindful awareness becomes a positive way of being in the world for students—whether learning and interacting at school, at home, or in the community.

An example can illustrate what mindful awareness is and how it plays a role in deepening knowledge to the level of embodiment. Through learning facts about hatred and engaging in initial reflections on the matter, a student develops the perspective that hatred is destructive for oneself and others. Further reflection and critical thinking on the topic leads to a deeper level of knowledge, reaching the level of critical insight, that is, an inner conviction. This perspective will enable the student to have a degree of tolerance in the face of provocations that would otherwise stimulate anger. To deepen this perspective to the point where it becomes second nature, the student must apply mindful awareness throughout his or her activities, recollecting the harm that can come from hatred. This means that in everyday life the student seeks to notice whenever he or she has become derailed from his or her intended perspective and attitude—which is the application of awareness—and then reminds him, or herself, by recollecting their values—which is mindfulness. The students should also couple this with periods of sustained attention on the insight that was gained, holding it without distraction so that it can become more deeply ingrained and embodied. Through these practices, values and commitments—such as to forgive, or to refrain from hatred, gossip, stealing or lying—can become more automatic, spontaneous parts of the student’s character.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

At AGN, research is conducted at two levels: Individual and collective levels of the educational institution.

Evaluation of the curriculum is done at three levels: Baseline, Midline and the Endline (both for students and teachers). Focus group discussions, surveys, in-depth interviews, case studies etc are few of the research methodologies that we use to assess the impact of our programme. The purpose of this interaction is to gauge the efficacy and applicability of the content for each school individually.

AGN is working with 20 schools across 10 states in India, and counting, to include over 1070 teachers and 4659 students. Before our intervention, we conducted a baseline study to create an information base against which the intervention’s progress and effectiveness can be successfully tracked during implementation as well as after the intervention in complete. The baseline survey indicated that most common negative emotions experienced by teachers in their daily lives were anger, anxiety and sadness. Out of these, most of the teachers identified anger as the emotion that negatively impacts their lives. Most teachers expressed that emotions can be regulated or managed, however several of these identified it to be a “difficult” task for which they are not equipped with the right skills.

Through the first phase of assessment that we conducted after 6 months of intervention, we identified certain key target areas. These included, awareness of positive and negative emotions, understanding chain of emotions and application of restraint in challenging situations.

The first leg of assessment was conducted with the teachers. 78% displayed a conscious experience of emotions. They shared that they are now more conscious of the emotions they are experiencing and the different ways in which individuals, relationships and situations impact their emotions. 63% were able to establish a correlation between stimuli and reactions. Midline forms mentioned instances of how they (teachers) logically explain their feelings or share their thoughts with the concerned person and “tackle the unpleasant situation through conversations. 67% of teachers also highlighted an improvement in regulation of negative emotions particularly anger and sadness. They are able to pay attention to emotions that are negative in nature, and adopt methods that reduce their intensity and effects on self and others. 89% responded positively towards mindfulness while engaging with tough and challenging situations in everyday life. They shared that mindfulness activities helps them reflect upon their experiences and their behaviour and most importantly bring calmness to their mind.

The second leg of assessment was conducted with the students. 68% of students are now able to make a clear distinction between negative and positive emotions. Approximately the same range, close to 68 % of students, also showed a clear recognition between what constitutes good and bad behaviour. The students not only displayed a clear understanding of certain emotions being negative but also the consequences of negative emotions and actions. This allows them to make clearer ethical judgments in given situations, for instance understanding that bullying is an unacceptable act, and that such situations requires interventions from them. 83% of students admitted that they look forward to the engagements on the curriculum with their teachers during UEE period as they are able to connect these lessons to their personal lives. Teachers’ creative usage and adaptation of the curriculum, his/her personal interest and motivation towards the curriculum and school’s readiness to formally inculcate it through process showcased an active development of interest and learning for the students.

CHALLENGES

Two thematic challenges emerged: (1) Institutional Challenges: school schedule constraints like availability of dates/time for continuous interaction/engagement with schools. The challenge is exaggerated owing to the vastness of the country and diversity of schools we are targeting. This also includes battling with issue like exams, holidays, vacations, change of teacher, different session schedules etc. (2) Individual Dependant Challenges: Teaching is a complex activity. Teachers’ decisions about lesson content and its transaction are shaped by multiple factors including teachers’ knowledge and understanding. Therefore the school as well as teacher’s belief in the core concepts of ethical education plays a crucial role in this process. The success of the programme is largely attributed to the proactiveness of teachers transacting the curriculum and that varies from school to school. (3) Effect of Environment outside school: Along with the child and school engagement, the third, equally important vertex of this triangle is family. A big challenge faced while making and transacting this curriculum is linking home environment with the UEE content. While great care and caution is being applied at all times to address issues that are universally applicable, given the variety and heterogeneity of Indian population, it is a challenge to ensure equal participation from family and friends outside of school. (4) Assessment Challenge: Another challenge that is inherent is the nature of the content, the assessment of which is difficult to ascertain in concrete terms in a short period of time.

CONCLUSION

Ethical education seems to be the missing piece in the giant jigsaw puzzle of our social fabric. The true purpose of education lies not just in acquiring knowledge and professional skills; it also includes the process of acquiring the values and developing the attitudes, skills, and behaviours to live in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the natural environment. Truly educated individual develops emotional security, empathy along with a critical approach to absorb the world around him/her. Education is seen as consisting of three components, namely, Information, Knowledge and Wisdom, each one leading to the next so that we ultimately end up with wisdom. While knowledge backed by information develops human skills and capabilities to achieve many things in the best way possible, it is wisdom that guides one to decide the priorities... Education without goodness i.e. without ethics is arrogant and dangerous. Unethical behaviour thrives in darkness and can only exist when ethical leaders remain bystanders in the face of evil. (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2015)

This curriculum makes a genuine attempt to provide real life situations to the students as that is the best to develop and understanding of ethics while also tests their ability for responsible decision making, constructive thinking and positive choices.

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