

# Vishal Talreja

## An empathetic teacher is key to learning and thriving in the new world

- “Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring; All of which have the potential to turn a life around” – Leo F. Buscaglia (1924 -1998), American author and Professor of Special Education, University of Southern California.
- “The Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) at the Primary level is 96% which comes down to 58.3% at the Upper Primary Elementary Level in government schools in India.” - Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation - MoSPI, 2012 (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/primary-education-in-india-progress-and-challenges/>)
- “51.9% children of Class 5 could not read a class 2 text in 2014. This means every second Class 5 student in rural India can’t read the text of a class three levels below.” ~ ASER Report 2015
- “57% of students in the country are educated but are not adequately prepared for employment.” ~ Pearson Voice of teacher Survey 2015“
- “Over 90% of India’s labour force still works in the informal sector, due to a lack of focus on skills required in the current job market.” ~ Dasra Research Report on Increasing Employability in India
- “Despite great progress in primary schooling in developing countries, the preparation of youth for work and life is very low.” ~ World Development Report 2007
- “59% of Indian children have stunted growth.” ~ The HUNGaMA Survey Report 2011

At Dream a Dream, we believe the above are symptoms of a deeper challenge around Child Adversity. Adversity can be of many kinds – abuse, abandonment, experiences of crime, extreme poverty, poor care, poor nutrition and/or violence. Adversity affects achievement of development milestones and impacts a child’s ability to stay in school, pay attention and engage in learning, build healthy relationships, engage with the world, make healthy life choices and breakout of poverty.

Educators, teachers and the government do not understand the lifelong impact of adversity and hence are unable to address it. In our work with young people, we see many experiences of child adversity. An 8-year old unable to make friends because he was abandoned as a child and lives in a shelter home. A 10-year old unable to pay attention and comprehend lessons in class because she has not being exposed to structured learning in her early childhood. A 12-year demonstrating aggression and violent behaviour to gain the teacher’s attention. A 9-year old being extremely quiet due to abuse at home.

What children and young people need is a caring, loving, safe and fun environment to help them build the skills needed to overcome adversity. An understanding of the negative impact of deprivation provides invaluable knowledge to educators in their efforts to support and teach students who live in poverty. When children and adolescents know that their teachers care about them and are trying their best to relate to the realities of their lives, they become far more inclined to trust and actively engage in learning.

In addition, in a dynamically changing world, young people are and will face very complex challenges and we as a society are not able to prepare young people for life through our current model of education. The lack of Life Skills is one of the most critical gap areas stopping young people from making healthy choices and becoming productive, contributing members of society.

We believe it is critical to empower young people with Life Skills to overcome gaps in the current education model; to acquire skills essential to get jobs and stay in jobs and to stem the damage from lack of nutrition and emotional support in early childhood development.

Life Skills are defined as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”.

Given the magnitude of Indian young population, the need of Life Skills training is far beyond what current interventions are able to address. This means we need interventions aimed at Enabling Adults to empower young people with Life- Skills. A programme that trains a wider range of teachers and community workers to facilitate the development of Life Skills amongst young people in their own schools and regions.

The good news is that it is possible to transform the life of young person who has faced adversity and meaningfully equip them with Life Skills. We know through our experience over the last 17 years of working with young people coming from backgrounds of adversity, that true transformation happens with the presence of a caring, compassionate adult in a young person’s life. Adults who work with young people are uniquely positioned to unlock their creative potential. Skilled adults can empower young people to make positive life choices, express themselves, commit to their own learning, and become leaders in their families and communities.

A new approach that provides teachers, youth workers, community workers and facilitators with the tools and skills required to develop Life Skills amongst young people and integrate Life Skills within their work. A model that uses experiential techniques to deepen understanding of the self, unlock the creative potential of the adult, learn to build supportive communities of learning and learn tools necessary to meaningfully and effectively engage young people in learning.

A programme that helps teachers master the following to help young people thrive in the new world -

1. Learning to Understand and Express their creative potential
2. Understanding and Engaging with young people with empathy
3. Deepening understanding of how young people learn and developing facilitation skills
4. Celebrating one’s role as an empathetic adult in a young person’s life
5. Transitioning from being a Teacher (deliverer of Knowledge) to a Facilitator (Enabler of skills to acquire knowledge)

We would like to present this new approach as an abstract at the Oxford Symposium for Comparative and International Education and demonstrate how this new approach has helped us transform over 3500 teachers and educators in India helping Dream a Dream impact 100,000 young people.