Action for Peace: A Workshop

Report

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Acknowledgements

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Manjrika Sewak
On 17 August 2013, WISCOMP staff members Seema Kakran and Manjrika Sewak facilitated a workshop titled *Action for Peace* at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi. The workshop brought together members of the Student Council and some faculty members (from the junior and senior school sections) to collectively formulate an action plan that could be implemented as a program in the school. Since all the students had attended two prior WISCOMP interactions, the purpose of this workshop was to help them formulate a concrete action plan for change within their school community. Joining the group to help them with this project were eight members of the faculty (some of whom had also attended prior WISCOMP capacity building workshops).

The facilitators opened the workshop with a set of exercises that combined team-building, active listening, and brainstorming. An appreciative inquiry lens was used to explore and identify the strengths that each participant brought to the group and which could be used to concretize an action plan.

The teachers and the students talked about their takeaways from the previously attended interactions. Some of the learnings bought forth by the teachers were: knowledge they had acquired about the functioning of the human brain (the reptilian, limbic, and neo-cortical parts and how these function in the context of conflict, discrimination, and violence); the differences between a conversation, debate and dialogue; and the models of learning (transmission, transactional, and transformational). With respect to their interactions with the teachers from Kashmir at the earlier WISCOMP workshops, they shared that it was not advisable to make assumptions without knowing the ground realities—Kashmir being a prime example. For instance, one teacher mentioned that her fears about traveling to Kashmir were based on the assumptions which were made from the media reportage. Yet, her travel to Kashmir for the WISCOMP workshop and her interaction with the teachers in the Valley had contributed towards creating positive images of the people and the place.
Reflecting on the previous WISCOMP workshops they attended, the St. Mary’s students underscored the following as important learnings:

- The need to work as part of team and practice patience;
- Respect the views of others and listen to these attentively, even if they are different from self;
- Students learnt that it was more important to make constructive suggestions for social change, rather than criticizing those in positions of power or living in the midst of conflict. They expressed a greater responsibility towards their actions and the prejudices they held. For example, one participant said, “we are the ones who make a stereotype and at the same time have the potential to bring a change”. Another added, “it is easy to play the blame game and blame everyone, but when we think of ourselves in the place of the Kashmiri youth or in the shoes of the Prime Minister, we realize it is more difficult than we think…It is very difficult to actually run a nation”.
- There was also greater awareness on the importance of knowing and understanding history and therefore there was recognition of the need to read about historical events from multiple perspectives. As one of the students put it, “the past influences our present, we need to learn about the past and not consider it to be some boring textbook lesson”.
- Students were also sensitized to the importance of using nonviolent methods for a social change. Many talked about how empowering this aspect of the workshop was because they felt that they had learnt the skills to bring change, using nonviolence.
- Perhaps the most common (and popular) insight (that many students reported) was with respect to the importance of the learning to coexist with the people from different cultures. One participant shared, “we learnt to respect all the identities and never to discriminate on the basis of caste, religion, or creed”.
- Self-confidence was another important takeaway for most of the students. One of the students expressed it as “my most useful learning at the workshop was not to be nervous; to remain confident about who you are, don’t be shy, and interact with confidence (because I think that these things are key to success)”. 
Following the sharing and collating of these learnings, the facilitators screened three short films (from diverse cultural contexts) which highlighted initiatives taken by the schools and young leaders to address problems/discrimination within their societies. These were: *The Enemy Has a Face* (which documents a dialogue for peace between Arab and Israeli high school students); *The Idea of India: Liberty* (which highlights the challenges posed by the continuing presence of ‘untouchability’ in Indian society, particularly in educational institutions); and *GSA 2011* (which documents a collaborative initiative undertaken by youth from 60 countries to improve the poor’s access to basic human needs in a slum in Brazil).

The films generated several ideas and strategies that school students could adopt to address the problems they faced in their communities. The post-film discussions gradually meshed into a brainstorming exercise wherein the participants formed three groups and set out to develop an action plan for peace that could be implemented on their school campus.

In small groups, the students addressed seven questions:

1. If there is one thing that you would like to change/improve in your school, community or neighborhood, what would it be?
2. To achieve the change, what needs to be done?
3. What resources (time/skills/support from seniors and finances are needed for each action)?
4. What resources does each member of the group have that can contribute in achieving the goal?
5. What timeframe are you setting for your group to achieve the goal(s) you have defined?
6. How are the responsibilities for each action distributed among the members of the group?
7. Do you foresee any problems in achieving what the group has set out to do? How will you overcome those problems?
Assisted by a teacher, the students first discussed the issues within the school that bothered them and which needed to be addressed. A diverse range of issues were identified. Some of these are shared here:

- There was a view that teaching and communication methods were not elicitive enough. The students felt that the school management and teachers were more oriented to use top-down transmission approaches to education in which less emphasis was given to inputs and feedback from students. In this context, drawing on their learnings from the WISCOMP workshop pedagogy, they suggested the use of interactive activities and ice-breakers by the teachers in the classrooms. This would help to draw out those students who are introverts or have low self-esteem. They will feel more comfortable about speaking out and getting involved in school activities.

- Teaching methodology should be expanded to include excursions and field visits so that students learn from such experiences (as much as they do from textbooks).

- Increased need for counseling to handle negative attitudes and ego issues that some children might bring to the school.

- Genuine respect and friendship towards those children who are materially less endowed or are differently abled with special needs.

- Greater attention needs to be given to the behavior of bullies. Students (and even the teacher participants) talked about the psychological and physical harm caused to children by the bullies.

- The lack of patience and motivation among students to listen to another person’s viewpoint. Participants felt that their peers were more concerned with proving themselves right. Some children even turn aggressive towards the teachers.

- Conflicts within the Student Council: Some members were considered ‘non-deserving’ to be in the Council. Also, there was a clash of ideologies and hence little interaction and coordination.

- Prejudice towards differently abled children in the school. One student talked about how he got hit when he tried to prevent a classmate from teasing a physically challenged student.

- Differences between teachers and parents. Parent-teacher relationships require greater focus and time.
Narrowing down the focus to three topics, the groups drew an action plan for the three issues, discussed below.

**Group 1: Transforming the House Day**

Group One sought to change the purpose and methodology of the House Day. Its members felt that the House Day had become very competitive and as a result it divided the student community rather than creating a sense of bonhomie and camaraderie. As one member of Group One stated, “we forget to work as a team which leads to ego clashes. We forget the principle of participating and instead focus on winning”. Another added, ‘if the competition is taken out of House Day events, a positive spirit will be initiated”.

The Group proposed discussions with the students and staff to make them realize the real objective of the House Day (which was participation, not competition). A conflict resolution team consisting of neutral teachers should be set up to address any grievances arising out of activities surrounding the House Day.

Rather than the House Day, an Annual Day was proposed for students to showcase their talent. “At the Annual Day show, we can display our skills without competition”, said one member.

In terms of the resources, the Group invited support from the teachers and parents. External trainers and skilled professionals were also identified as important supporters. More time should be provided for preparation and the Student Council should coordinate all the work.

Recommendations: The group members foregrounded the following principles which they felt should inform all school activities: ‘Tapping into each other’s potential’. They suggested that the students should be motivated to do a good show by making them focus on participation, rather than winning. Teachers could play an important role in sensitizing students to this principle. Conscious of the negative fallout of ego clashes and turf wars, they underscored the need to infuse a sense of team spirit in the student body. As one of them put it, “we should remove the selfishness of winning”. Since they represented grades 11\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\), the participants felt that they should be role models for the kind of
behaviour they expected from the student community. Linked to this was also the recognition that they should take responsibility, rather than blaming others for a bad situation. As a strategy for increasing motivation levels across classes, they proposed that all activities and pre-event work should be divided among the students (from different grades and sections). Currently, the bulk of the participation comes from students of Class 11.

A one-year timeframe was proposed for the aforementioned activities.

As a methodology, a democratic process of consultation was suggested. Teachers would play a key role in this process by coordinating between, and connecting with the students. The Group asked the teachers to be more approachable and friendly.

**Group 2: Be the Change—Student Council**

Paraphrasing Mohandas Gandhi’s quote, ‘Be the change you wish to see in the world’, Group 2 focused on the need for introspection and personal change among the student leaders of the School, particularly those who from the Student Council (SC). It was felt that the SC had been partial in its activities/interactions; it had indulged in politics and acted irresponsibly; and and its functioning was affected by the ego clashes. Currently, the SC is elected for two years. But for it to be efficient and responsible, the Group felt that there should be a system for recall and elections should be held again at the end of the first year (or after six months) if the performance was not satisfactory. Every quarter there should be feedback on the performance of the SC. In addition, there should also be a mechanism to review the performance of the SC (since it stays in power for two years).

Group 2 emphasized on the need to bring about changes in the behaviour of the student leaders, rather than trying to change other students with whom the elected members had disagreements. However, it qualified its critique with the rider that the feedback was not targeted at individual members of the SC but rather at the system and the rules that regulated its functioning.

The ‘plan of action’ which was proposed by Group 2 was a Complaint Box in which students could put suggestions and share opinions
anonymously. This Box would be opened in the assembly every quarter, which would provide a context for the discussions around changes in the SC.

The Group invited support from the school management, teachers and their peers. They felt that the support of the Principal would be particularly important as she held a position of power to keep a check on the ‘arbitrary behaviour’ of the Council and communicate with position holders about the possibility of being replaced in case they were not performing well. For Group 2, the two most significant goals were: one, to ensure that the SC members did not act partially towards those who were their friends, and two, to strengthen the Council so that it could stop wrongful practices such as the bullying of juniors and other forms of aggressive behaviour. It also proposed that neutral members be elected to the SC so that they could ensure that diverse range of perspectives were brought in when the Council took decisions. These neutral members could also help with counselling and mediating between the SC and those who have complained against them. In terms of the timeframe, they planned to begin lobbying for these changes in the current academic year.

The Group was aware of the challenges that lay ahead, particularly with respect to the concern that the school authorities could be partial towards the SC members (and therefore not take their suggestions seriously). They also acknowledged that the Complaint Box could be used to settle personal enmity and other students could be ‘brainwashed’ against the Council members on the basis of this enmity. Current members of the SC (who were also the participants at this workshop) felt that, as individuals they might lose faith and confidence in themselves, if such a practice was to be initiated. The current Head Boy said that the Complaint Box could be used to victimize and humiliate an SC member, which could result in serious psychological problems for that person. The suggestion of opening the Complaint Box in the assembly would be particularly humiliating for the elected members of the Council. Also, they felt that sometimes, the elected members need time to prove their worth and a quarterly system of ‘feedback’ (which SC members saw as ‘criticism’) would not help. To reduce the sense of stigmatization that SC members would feel, the other groups requested Group 2 to replace ‘Complaint Box’ with ‘Feedback/Suggestion Box’ as this would be less threatening.
Group 3: We Are One! We Are Together!

The problems faced by the international students at the school were the focus of the presentation made by Group 3. Saying that St. Mary’s School has a large population of international students, the Group members felt that their wellbeing should form an important focus of the School’s activities. It identified the following issues that confront the international students:

- Acceptance of international students: they find it difficult to get accepted in the student community. The students don’t take an initiative to befriend them. Only a few sensitive ones do so.
- There is considerable ‘groupism’ which alienates the international students. It takes them much longer to feel accepted and to integrate into the student community.
- Sometimes, teachers and students start conversing in Hindi and as a result, they feel excluded. Some students also indulge in name-calling and labelling international students in stereotypical ways.

The Group presented its action plan with the following opening statement: “We have to first accept that there is a problem…that sometimes we ignore these students, perhaps not intentionally. Therefore, the issue deserves the attention of the teachers”. As a first step, Group 3 suggested that the teachers should take the initiative and use problem-solving skills to better integrate the international students with their Indian peers. The school management, teachers and students should work together to provide opportunities to the international students to participate in curricular and extra-curricular activities and extra effort should be made to increase their sense of comfort and happiness in the new surroundings. The Group suggested ice breakers (and other informal and social activities) to increase interaction between the Indians and the internationals. They also suggested organization of a food festival through which the international students could showcase their cuisine, crafts and culture. Out-of-school interactions, particularly social visits to the homes of their Indian classmates were strongly recommended to increase their confidence levels and reaffirming them that their peers respect them.
Further, it was suggested that teachers speak in English and lay out a context for conversations with them. Teachers can also brainstorm on specific learning methodologies so that the performance of these students improves and are also able to excel in academic and extra-curricular activities (like their Indian counterparts). The participation and support of the juniors (who Group 3 saw as the pinnacle of each activity at the school) was also elicited because they have an enthusiasm which is infectious which can make the international students feel more welcomed.

Special Hindi classes should be organized for the international students. This will help them to feel more confident about living in Delhi. Some students with a poor understanding of English (such as those from the Philippines and Vietnam) should be offered extra support to enhance their English language skills. This would help to further increase their self-esteem and confidence. They added the rider that the methodology and strategy should be different for a class 2 student and a class 11 student.

A support group of Indian students should be set up, which can serve as a contact point for any complaints, problems or issues that international students confront. This support group will also create a sense of reassurance among the international students that there is someone they can turn to in case of need. The Group also proposed that this support group could address the problem of bullying which was common on the school premises. It sought the help of the school counsellor to engage with bullies (who invariably act aggressively out of a deep sense of insecurity). A counselling support group for bullies would help other students, particularly those from outside India, to feel more secure.

At the conclusion of the workshop, the WISCOMP facilitators invited the teacher and student participants to share their learnings/insights in a Closing Circle. Some of these are shared here (in first person):

- Teachers were surprised to learn that the students were thinking along the same lines as them with reference to the contentious House Day event. They were happy to know that students did not want to compete and rather wanted to cooperate. Like the students, the teachers too felt that the event was getting too competitive; but had
earlier thought that the students wanted it that way. The WISCOMP workshop however cleared these misconceptions by providing a context for the teachers and students to discuss this issue.

- The workshop helped the students to shed the stereotype of Pakistanis as ‘men holding guns’ and ‘women wearing burkhas’. This was done through the screening of a film on a dialogue between Indian and Pakistani high school students and the ensuing discussion.

- The teachers valued the ‘structured interaction with students’ which the workshop provided. They said that this opportunity to talk to the students in the context of a ‘structured dialogue’ was often not available in the school owing to the pressures of academics and co-curricular activities. Since the workshop also included teachers from the primary section, it provided a unique opportunity for the primary teachers to meet and interact with the senior-school students whom they had taught several years ago. One of them shared that there are very few avenues in the school context, to exchange views between those in the primary and senior sections.

- The school Head Boy shared the following learning from the workshop: “before getting into an argument with your adversary, first put yourself in the shoes of ‘the other’ and then analyze the conflict. This will generate empathy for your adversary and it will help you to arrive at a mutually beneficial solution”.

- Students with strong viewpoints were able to talk with one another. As one of them put it, “I learned to be a good listener, the importance of team-work and trusting the other”. His classmate added, “we should not hurt those we disagree with. We learnt that every student has a great potential and we are all equal”.

- In response to the discussion on the prejudices towards the international students, participants reported a higher sense of sensitivity towards them. One of them said, “we should be curious about those who are different, rather than judging them for the differences. We should try to learn something new about them and even build bonds of friendship”.

Two months later, in October 2013, the students participated in a second WISCOMP workshop, this time with their Kashmiri counterparts in Srinagar. WISCOMP used this opportunity to examine if the learnings
from the first workshop were sustained and implemented—in other words, did the first workshop enable genuine change and did this help students to address the problems they faced? It was heartening to observe that many students spoke in the affirmative. For instance, a member of the Student Council said that the elected student representatives used the consensus-building tools learnt at the WISCOMP workshop to ‘organize interactive discussions’ with those who had differences with the Council. As he put it, “we listened to them and tried to understand their problem. We learnt to discuss/talk things out….The WISCOMP workshop also taught us the importance of being patient and calm, cheerful and hard-working”.

Another student shared the following: “During a conflict between two groups of students, I stayed calm and patient which I learnt at the WISCOMP workshop. I did not lose my temper. I was able to convince the students that fighting and arguing is not the only way to solve conflicts…We can sit patiently and talk about the matter”.

One student also mentioned the issue of bullying and how the workshop had convinced him to ‘choose nonviolence while responding to bullies’. As he put it, “I used a friendly approach to make them understand my views. It worked. They apologized. It does not help anyone when we hurt another person”.

In the context of teacher-parent differences, a teacher shared: “I made a conscious attempt to listen to the parents’ anxieties. This act of listening on my part helped the parents feel better”. Her colleague added: “I am more tolerant towards my family members and students... I learnt that all of us have to be good listeners”.

Program

8:15 a.m. – 8:30 a.m. Welcome and Introductions
This session was used to introduce the facilitators and discuss the workshop structure and share expectations from the workshop.

8:30 a.m. – 9:30 a.m. Sharing and Collating Learnings
This session included brief five-minute presentations by the student groups (if any) who had attended previous workshops organized by WISCOMP and individual sharing of learnings.

9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Film Screening and Discussion
Three short videos were screened and discussed. These videos focused on peace initiatives by youth/schools. They were: ‘Seeds of Peace: Milaap 2010’, ‘GSA 2011’, and ‘The Idea of India: Liberty’

10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. Brainstorming
During this session, participants were divided into three groups to brainstorm and come up with a plan of action that could help them to take the collective learning forward.

11:30 a.m. – 11:45 p.m. Break

11:45 a.m. – 12:00 noon Finalizing presentations
The breakout groups refined their presentations before the entire group met again. Presentations were made using flip charts.
12:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.  Sharing ideas and feedback
The entire group met to share each of the three ideas and see where synergy could be built.

1:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.  Closing Circle
The Facilitators

Seema Kakran is Deputy Director, WISCOMP.

Manjrika Sewak is Assistant Director, WISCOMP and also a member of the Visiting Faculty for the Peacebuilding Diploma Program at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.
Names of Participants

1. Abha Goel is a teacher at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
2. Mamta is a teacher at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
3. Abraham is a teacher at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
4. Gargi is a teacher at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
5. Kush Gaur is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
6. Apoorva Sharma is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
7. Atharva Puranak is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
8. Ashmita Phukan is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
9. Kunal Ahuja is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
10. Pratibhu Rawat is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
11. Tanish Chachra is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
12. Jyot Karan Singh is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
13. Shikha Malik is a student at St. Mary’s School, New Delhi.
Glimpses